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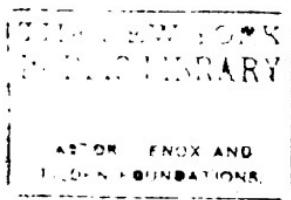
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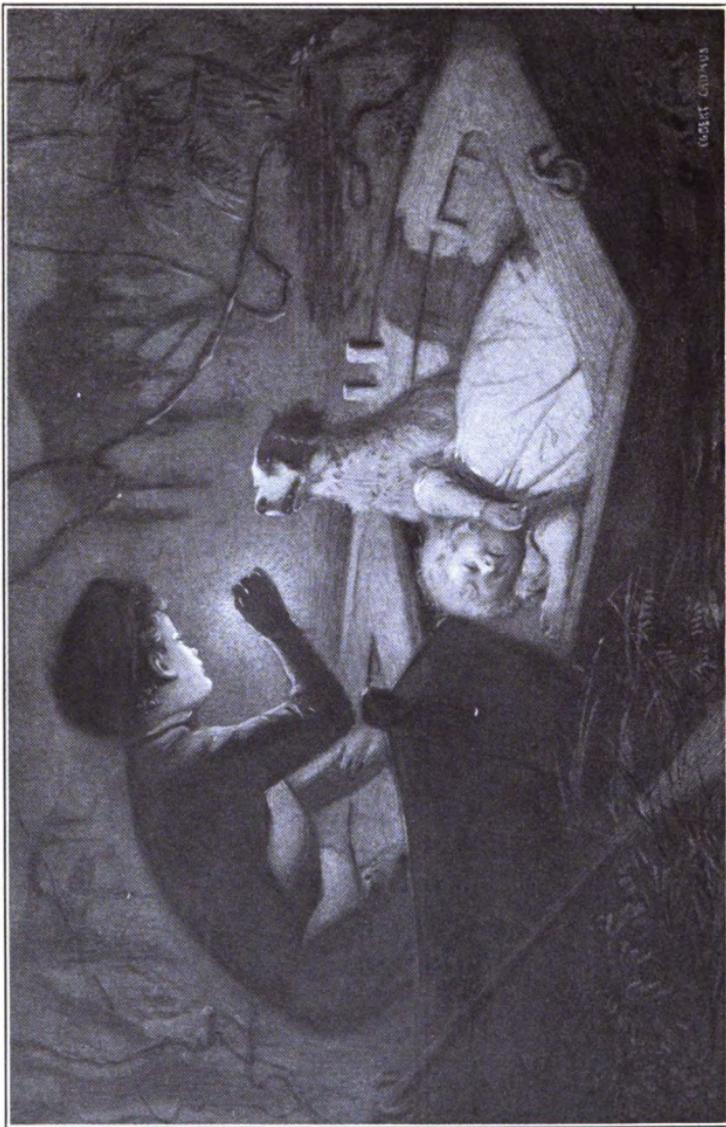
D. ELLA NIRDLINGER

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★ FUTURE



"Lighted a match and dimly made out a picture that struck him dumb with amazement."—Page 77.



1908

ALTHEA

OR

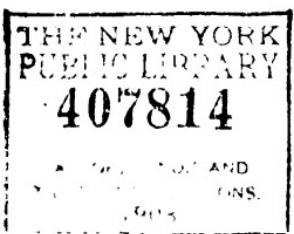
**THE CHILDREN OF ROSEMONT
PLANTATION**

BY

D. ELLA NIRDLINGER

**NEW YORK, CINCINNATI, CHICAGO :
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1908.**

M.R.



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To My Beloved Parents
and the happiest, holiest spot on God's fair earth
Our Home
I lovingly dedicate
My Story

Preface

I have tried in the following story to give some of the home experiences and plays of my own happy childhood, which passed in various parts of our country, and in varying fortunes; but always in company with four merry brothers, a dear sister, and beloved parents.

D. E. N.

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ALTHEA.

CHAPTER I.

A LITTLE SISTER.

BORN DECEMBER 25th, 18-5

~~LeMay~~ and ~~Lemay~~ Alvord

BORN DECEMBER 25th, 18-7

~~Lucille~~ and ~~Lucillian~~ Alvord

IT is rather unusual for a home to be blessed with a dear little son and daughter on Christmas Day; but, when another tiny boy and girl arrived on the same beautiful feast, two years later, Mammy Clar, bewildered, yet proud, stood on the entry stairs and solemnly announced to the assembled servants,—

“Anudder twins! Fo’ de lan’ sakes!”

Everyone declared that the “Twins” must be given beautiful and appropriate names; so after much discussion and many changes the above entry was finally written in their mother’s Bible. It was fortunate a record had thus been made, as not very long after there might have been grave doubts as

to what the children's Christian names really were; for no sooner could the tots lisp than they promptly changed them to suit themselves. Leona began it by calling her brother "Lee," while "Lona" was as much of her pretty name as his baby lips could master.

One morning Mrs. Alvoyd came for the "Babies" (as the second pair of toddlers were called) and finding Lucille asleep gently lifted her little son from the crib and carried him to Mammy for his early bath; but just as he came back to her, all sweet and lovely as only a baby can be, a wail from the crib startled them, and there, bolt upright, sat Lucille, staring woefully at her twin's empty pillow.

"Why, darling, here he is," laughed her mother, going to the small bed with Lucillian in her arms.

Lucille looked up, and as her eyes fell on her twin she waved her dear little arms to him and, smiling through the big tears, almost sang her very first words,

"O Loo!"

Lucillian stared at her in silent astonishment for a moment, then laughing softly, as though at a good joke no one understood but themselves, answered merrily,

"Lolly! Lolly!"

But, dearie me, all this happened years ago; and the "Twins" grew to be the merriest, naughtiest, dearest little people in Florida.

They were as much alike as four stars. Sturdy, dark-eyed, dark-haired, beautiful children. At least, that is what their mother thought as she came through the playgrounds on a balmy morning in December, a week before the "Babies'" eleventh birthday, and found beneath the white and yellow dome of an old orange tree the twins merrily planning the longed for day-after-to-morrow, when they were all going to Jacksonville to buy Christmas presents.

This little trip had always been their birthday gift, and was the happiest time of all the year; even Christmas day itself paled before the glories of the sixty-mile trip, the two whole days in the city, the splendid feasts in the Spanish Cafés, while, grandest of all, the "Children's Flower Cantata" in the beautiful Opera House.

Such a thing as not to go on the "Birthday Journey" had never been thought of. Why, they had gone every year as long as they could remember!

"Lolly, how much have you saved?" Lee was asking, as he calmly pelted Loo with oranges.

"Six dollars and thirteen cents," answered Lucille.

"O my! I've only four," groaned Lona. "All my children die and I have to pay Loo for burying them;" which motherly speech produced a laugh, for the way Lona's babies died was well known to the wicked quartette, who were judges and jury in

frequent trials and hangings of bisque, china, and rubber desperadoes.

"Well, I have four, too, and Lona owes me for a funeral or so," sang Loo from a tree-top whither she had wiggled to escape Lee's oranges.

"That makes fourteen dollars and thirteen cents; then, with my eight—twenty-two altogether. Now, let's buy something big this year!"

"All right," consented Lona promptly; "would a barrel of candy be big enough to suit you?"

"O no!" answered Lee impatiently. "I mean—let's get something we can all have fun out of and that will last forever — something to show for our money."

"Well, if that's all you want you could keep the — barrel," laughingly returned his twin, who was so full of Christmas plans and secrets she couldn't keep quiet to even listen to another, no matter how grand.

"I think like Lee," assented Loll, who was the most unselfish and thoughtful one of the children. Though a mischievous tomboy, her little heart was overflowing with love and devotion for every creature, white or black, at Rosemont; and though none of them suspected it the most sheltering care of their father and the tenderest love of their mother were given to the gentle, merry girl; for both feared that the shadow sometimes seen in those soft dark eyes foretold that their youngest Christmas child might be called to bloom in a fairer land, when

their hearts would hold her dearest—on the threshold of a beautiful girlhood.

"But what could we get?" asked Loo, swinging himself down beside his brother.

"I thought—"

"O wait a minute; here comes Mama," cried Lona, whose bright eyes had discovered her mother coming through the trees, "she will think of something fine."

They greeted her with laughter and shouts, all asking at once what she thought would be nice and—"lasting."

"That's just what I've come to talk to you about," she replied, when they were seated under the trees again; and the children were so full of Christmas joys that they did not notice the seriousness in her voice nor the traces of tears on her face.

"Goody! About to-morrow, Mam?" asked Loo.

"Partly, dear, but would it grieve you all very much if we did not go to Jacksonville this year?"

"Not—go—at—all!" they cried, in a dismayed chorus.

"No. But father and I will give you as lovely a gift as we gave Lee and Lona once before—only this time you all must help us a little by giving up the 'Birthday Journey,'" she said quietly looking wistfully at the four childish faces before her.

"Is—it—a—sailboat?" asked Lee, his eyes shining through tears that *would* come.

For a sailboat had been the dearest wish of the boys' heart and was the one pleasure forbidden them. Florida waters are too treacherous to trust small people in sailboats. The others were too shocked to even ask questions.

"No, dear, it is not a boat. The gift is the subject of a sad little story," answered his mother, her eyes filling with tears as she looked toward the river. Lolly crept nearer, and laid her curly head in her mother's lap saying softly,

"Don't, Mama, we'll be good."

"Why, is it just a story?" asked Lona brightening.

"No, daughter, it is all very true and very sad."

"What is it?" ventured Lee, interest beginning to take the place of disappointment in his voice.

Mrs. Alvoyd sat thinking for a moment, then began the story of the "Christmas Gift" in her sweet girlish way; for though the mother of the tall boys and girls gathered around her, she had never lost the charm of her girlhood.

"Many years ago, Babies, two motherless little girls played, studied and romped together as you do, only they were not sisters. I was the daughter of the home and Althea Drayton was my father's ward. We were very happy and loved each other dearly; but one day we found ourselves too old for dolls and coasting, for we lived in the North, you know, and then a very dear Somebody came to carry me away to his orange groves in Florida——"

"That was nice, because he was father," commented Lona, gravely.

"Yes," replied her mother, softly; "and my precious Althea did not have long to miss me, for she, too, was taken from the old home to a new, and the night before my wedding we sat by my fire talking for hours of the old life closing and the new one about to begin.

"When my little clock struck three we said our prayers, and, kneeling with our arms around each other, promised, that if ever in the years to come one of us needed the aid of the other we had only to ask, and it would be given. The years rolled away, and while they brought me four dear babies they left my Althea nothing but two little graves in their path. Five years ago last summer I received a letter saying she was going abroad, and might never come home; and not until last night did I hear from her again—when I received a message reminding me of our promises. Althea is dying and leaving alone in a great, strange world a baby daughter, a fatherless little Althea, three years old. Her note begs me to come to her—to let her see the little one in my arms." Mrs. Alvoyd paused and looked at the children. The girls were crying softly, and the boys were very serious.

"Still, father and I wish you to be happy about it, too," she continued more brightly. "But won't you, Lee, be willing to give up the 'Birthday Journey'

so that we can go to New York for the little girl?" she asked, simply.

"Yes'm. The poor little thing!" he answered, bravely, though the crash of his holiday's dearest pleasure went with his reply.

"Leona, dear?" and Mrs. Alvoyd looked cheerful.

"I'd do as Lee would," decided that young lady, who would have agreed with her twin had he suggested that they all walk to New York and escort the little stranger back to Rosemont in a body.

"Lolly?" questioned her mother holding her close, for the shadows in the brown eyes were very deep just then.

"O Mama, I'd love to have a baby sister,—if," smiling over to her twin, "Loo would—would you, honey?"

"No, I wouldn't! I'd just hate her!" wrathfully cried the boy to the astonishment of them all.

"Why, Lucillian!" exclaimed his mother, "I——"

"Mama," interposed Loo, quickly, turning white and red in his angry passion. "We don't want to share you and father with anyone. And—and she'd spoil everything," he added resentfully.

"O Loo, I'm surprised," said his mother in a hurt tone, "that you are not willing to have my dearest friend's little baby come to me. You children are becoming selfish in the pleasure of your own companionship; and a little girl to love and take care of will only endear us the more to one another. Of

course, father and I wish you to be as affectionate as you are; but remember our dear Lord made our hearts like unto His: the more we have to love the more we can. And a baby is the sweetest thing in the world to love. You don't really know how happy, how perfectly happy, a home is until a little child comes into it," she added in a voice sweet and tender.

A sorrowful, disappointed look had crept into Lolly's eyes at her twin's outburst; but now she leaned over and, putting her arms around him, faced her mother, saying loyally,

"Mama' if — if Loo doesn't want her to come — I don't either."

"Lucille," replied Mrs. Alvoyd, quietly, and when their parents addressed them by their full names the children knew they were very serious; "I do not object to your agreeing with Lucillian in matters of study or play, but this is something more important. You are grieving me more than I can tell, for I thought you would all welcome the baby with open arms. But, daughter, do you, or do you not wish me to fill the place of the dear mother God is taking away from little Althea. For of course we could place her in a boarding-school, and I would do it rather than bring her here to be made unhappy by not being welcome," she added, slowly and distinctly, looking from one to the other with a grieved look in her gentle eyes.

Lolly glanced appealingly at her twin; but Loo stood sullenly digging his toes into the soft petals heaping the ground.

"O Loo," she began, but was stopped by her mother saying gently, but firmly,

"I wish you to answer for yourself, my daughter."

Loll turned very white, and replied in a low tone, "I — I do — want her — to come."

Loo looked up, and stared blankly at her for a moment, then, muttering something about, "three to one," walked angrily down to the boathouse path. Mrs. Alvoyd wanted to call him back, but she understood and trusted his heart, and thought this first selfish jealousy would quickly pass away.

"I'm sorry," she said, kissing poor Lolly's flushed face, "but Lucillian will soon see how unkind his actions are, and before Father and I leave to-night, he, too, will be preparing to welcome the desolute little orphan to our happy home."

"To-night, Mama," gasped Lona, "won't you and father be here for Christmas either?" New York in her mind being as far off as the North Pole.

"O yes. We'll be back for Christmas, though I fear not until the day before. So work hard and have the tree and everything in readiness." She rose as she finished speaking, and broke off an azalea branch to wave to their father as he came looking for them through the plaza. "There's Papa

waiting for me. Don't forget to make some small gift for — Sister Althea," she called back from the path.

"We won't!" came the answer from three sober children sitting quietly under the orange trees.

CHAPTER II.

HOME.

LEE, Lona, Loo, and Loll lived a busy, happy life at Rosemont, one of the most beautiful plantations in Florida. It had belonged to Dr. Alvoyd's father long before the war, and was one of the few Southern estates not ruined during the struggle between freedom and slavery.

The homestead stood alone on the crest of a low hill; a long, yellow house, from whose roomy, rose-covered verandas could be seen the broad white plaza, lovely in flowers, trees, and fountains; while the green and gold orange groves sloped to the river in the distance.

Though stately and grand, every nook and corner of the rambling old mansion was filled with tenderest love and sweet home spirit. "Father" was the steady, tranquil anchorage, and after all little voyages, whether pleasant or stormy, the barks of his "Gipsy Quartette," as he fondly called the twins, came sailing home, sure of a tender love, even if sometimes tempered with justice.

"Mama" was a royal personage, to be taken care of and worshiped, and, while not the leading spirit of their lives, she had the deepest love of their

hearts, and was always the pilot when the voyages were stormy, and the little hearts full of woe. Guided by their father, the children gave to her a position too rarely held by the noblest of God's creations — a sheltered motherhood.

And although Doctor and Mrs. Alvoyd entertained a great deal, the twins had never cared for other companions; so now it *was* hard to understand, that in one short week all would be changed and an unknown, three-year-old stranger added to the household as "sister."

When their parents had really gone, and the novelty of the idea of the little intruder partly worn away, the full realization of their disappointment was hard to bear.

Lee and Lona had the consolation of each other's misery; but poor Loll had to suffer her heartache alone, for Loo went about like a thunder-cloud and took no notice whatever of her.

When his mother kissed him good-bye, she had whispered, "Do unto others, Loo. Think if it was your Lolly all alone in New York to-night, instead of baby Althea."

And though he clung to her for a moment he only whispered back miserably, "Good-bye, dearest Mama."

Then for the first time Mrs. Alvoyd realized how deeply jealousy had grown in his heart, and hers ached for her boy; but Loo's bursts of anger had

always been over so quickly and he had always been so sorry, that she comforted herself with the thought that by the time she returned he would have forgotten his unkindness, and perhaps be even more loving to the new little sister than any of the rest.

Loo's was a hard nature to govern, for, though loving and winning, a proud, sensitive temperament lay underneath — to be conquered only by gentleness.

Early the next morning, the first of the holidays, Loll watched him go down to the boathouse, and, after waiting a few minutes hoping he'd call her to come too, she followed unasked; but he pretended not to see her until, after standing on the landing for awhile, she put her foot on the gunwale of his skiff, saying pleadingly,

"O Loo, won't—"

"Don't you dare to put your foot into my boat!" he cried, with flashing eyes.

"Loo," she said, slowly drawing back her little bare foot, "I'm terrible sorry you're mad; but I couldn't tell mama a lie; and I can't help wanting Althea to come. I tried not to when you said you didn't, but I do anyway and I can't help it."

"Well, you'll get paid for going back on me. We have to be twins, but we won't be partners any more. Just you wait and see," he cried wrathfully, pushing the boat a little from the shore, "how every-

thing will be spoiled. We'll have to tag her every single place we go—and it'll all be your fault."

"How on earth can you say it's my fault! What did you want me to do? Please tell me and I'll do it now," cried Loll desperately, for frowns and cross words from Loo were so new as to be terrifying to her gentle heart.

"O, yes, you can do it now, with father and mother half way to New York," he replied scornfully; "but you could have said just as well as not that you'd like to have her come, but that you'd like it better if we four could be just what we always have been—alone. I did, and you ought, too. But no, you'd go and have her come and now we'll never be happy again. Just see what she's done already," he went on, waxing wroth over the offences he had figured up, as being direct results of the disregard to his wishes—"instead of going on the 'Birthday Journey' and having a fine time and buying dandy presents we have to stay home and make 'em. And—now she's spoilt our being partners," he added sullenly.

"No, she hasn't, Loo Alvoyd, it's you yourself! I think you are acting just hateful," declared Loll hotly, for the first time in their short lives speaking angrily to her twin.

"Well, I don't care," he retorted carelessly, though a little less spiritedly; "I'm going off for a good

time anyway." And with this parting taunt he started down the creek.

Loll was sadly starting back to the house, when Lee and Lona came racing over the lawn from the barn.

"Loll," called Lee, "where's Loo?"

"Gone rowing."

"Alone?" questioned Lona, looking suspiciously at Loll's flushed face and drooping lips.

"No; I went with him," laughingly retorted her sister.

"I see you did," was Lona's only comment; but she sternly decided to scold Loo well for being unkind to Loll, for she knew by experience he would never go off without her unless he was in a rage. For, while Lona had a small temper of her own to watch out for, she had a tender heart and couldn't stand anything unkind or sulky.

"Loo, Loo!" shouted Lee, running to the edge of the wharf, "come back quick. Joe's going to take us down to the swamp for the tree, and we're going to crab while we wait."

"Oh, please come, Loo!" cried Loll, ready to forgive him on the spot if he would only be friends again.

"I don't want to go," he answered gruffly, taking up the oars.

"All right, but don't you touch my pigeon's nests while I'm gone," answered Lee, perfectly willing

to let him pout if he wished to, only he wasn't going to allow his private property to be tampered with in the meantime.

So they drove away, leaving Loo alone on the creek, angry with them, angry with himself, but angrier still with the little unknown cause of all his unhappiness.

Loll wanted to stay home too, fearing that he would be only the more offended at her for leaving him; but Lona would not allow it.

"He won't play with you, anyhow, cross as he is. And I promised mama not to let you be alone; so you just come with us."

And though she yielded, one heart in the big wagon was heavy with grief.

To Loo, the day seemed ages long, and the world dark without Loll. It was the worst and the best thing in his life that he spent that long lonely day with no companion but his unhappy longings for his twin, and bitter thoughts of revenge on "that Althea."

He just would hate her! She had no right to come where she was not wanted! Loo forgot he was the only one who did not want her. But jealousy never reasons.

When the children came home in the early evening Lucillian, who had been patiently waiting for them, raced to the stable to help them from their perches in the midst of a magnificent pine.

"That's a daisy!" he exclaimed rather meekly as he examined the tree's broad, fatal wound.

Loll was so relieved and happy at his change of humor, that she threw her arms about him and, kissing him, said joyfully,

"Isn't it grand! And we caught lots of crabs; but, Loo," she whispered, as they were going up to the house, "we've got the finest secret. We'll tell you after tea, so don't let on."

"O tell me now——"

"Hush! There's Mammy;" and Loll walked quietly up the steps.

Mammy Clar washed and helped them dress; then gave them their light supper in the rose-arbor; for though they were big boys and girls she still claimed them as her "babies" to cuddle, spoil and scold at will. A loving, faithful guardian — and subject, all in one.

As soon as the last golden cake and rosy berry were finished, the children disappeared, and, sitting on the wharf half hidden under an immense oleander, unfolded to Loo's wondering ears the secret.

"Let me tell, because I found it!" exclaimed Lee, by right of discovery.

"Well, go on, but hurry up," was Lona's rather ungracious permission.

"You see," began Lee, "Joe left us on the old bridge to crab while he went for the tree. Well,

after awhile Lona said, 'I wonder what this bridge was ever built for?' And Loll said, 'I suppose the men from the city made it so that the carts could get to the palm groves down in the swamp.' Then I said, you girls stay here and I'll walk down this way and see if I can find anything of——"

"I thought he was never coming back," interrupted Lona, "when we heard him calling and calling away off, and we ran down the path as fast as we could; it's terribly hard to get through, but he kept shouting and we kept answering — and when we got to him where do you think he was?"

"In the water?"

"No."

"Where, for pity sakes?"

"Standing on the deck of an old, old wreck!"

"A what!" asked Loo, his eyes opening wide with astonishment.

"A wreck; an old boat going to pieces; but it's got a dandy little cabin, tho' all the windows are broken out," explained Lee impressively.

"O, how I wish I'd gone," lamented Loo.

"Serves you right for being such a crank. And you did miss a jolly good time," answered Lona, severely.

"Well, we're going again as soon as we can, so you will go then. Only 'mum's' the word, because father would let us go if he were home, but you know how fidgety Mammy is, and she won't. We'll

just let on we're going rowing and then I'll take you; I know the way, just follow the creek,— I'm sure it passes the bridge."

"Let's go to-morrow," proposed Loo eagerly.

"No, boys, we can't go now until after Christmas," Lona said decidedly. "Just see what we have to do; trim the tree, that is, our part of it; decorate the house, and make the presents."

"We'll have to take Althea, if you wait until then," taunted Loo, his resentment showing again for a moment.

"She'll be asleep maybe, when we go. Babies take lots of naps," wisely remarked Lona, who knew almost nothing about small lords and ladies of creation. But as nobody present knew any more, it didn't make any difference.

"We'll wait 'till she is then, or I don't go," threatened Loo.

"O get out! You act like a baby yourself!" laughed Lee, who honestly thought Loo was pretending most of his anger, though he had been much surprised at his staying home that afternoon.

The next few days were busy ones for everyone on the plantation. All the day before Christmas the children worked like bees, decorating the hall and dining-room with holly and pine boughs; while in the doorways and windows they hung draperies of the soft, silver moss, caught back with garlands of roses and oleanders. They covered the tree with

glazed cotton and ropes of bright cranberries, then left it for Santa Claus's silent visit.

As twilight fell and their parents had not returned, the children's hearts grew heavier and heavier. One after another they stopped in the midst of the preparations to peer down the drive, each hoping to be the first to catch sight of the beloved travelers.

After tea they assembled on the front steps, "to wait until they did come, if they stayed all night!"

Lee sat at the top, sucking a peppermint ring he had discovered in the box of last year's tree decorations.

Lona leaned against the lower post with her hands clasped idly in her lap; but they had been very busy all day long, and now their position seemed to emphasize their little mistress's weariness and low spirits.

Loo lay at full length on the lowest step, with his head pillowed in Loll's lap.

"What do you think she'll look like?" asked Lona, suddenly.

"Who?" and Loll, who had been nearly asleep, sat up, rather bewildered.

"Why, the baby, of course, who else could I mean, we have seen Mama and Father," answered Lona, impatiently; waiting was beginning to have a bad effect on everybody.

"I'll wager she's got red hair and cross eyes," muttered Loo.

"Mama said her mother was very beautiful, and had golden curls and blue eyes," replied Loll gently.

"I don't know her whole name yet, do you?" asked Lee.

"Why, yes, it's Althea Wayne."

"Wayne — Wayne, why that's the name of the fort in Indiana, where Grandpa LeRoy was born," he cried, in a pleased, surprised voice. "Don't you remember, Mama told us how General Mad Anthony Wayne fought the Indians there, and whipped them, and they had to go further West, and how the people named the fort 'Wayne.' Why, Grandpa LeRoy was the first white child born in the little place and the friendly Indians used to come to their house and look and look at him in his wooden cradle and call him Kekiongo, Kekiongo! White papoose! White papoose!"

"Why, who ever told you all that, Lee Alvoyd?" asked Loo in a dubious voice, turning around to smile up at his brother.

"Mama did herself, and she told you too, but it was a long time ago, so I suppose the rest of you have forgotten."

"I remember a part of it, but not all," said Lona.

"Do you think everything is ready, Sis?" asked Lee, after a long silence that nothing but impatient sighs had broken.

"Yes," she answered wearily; "the hall and dining room are all trimmed, the tree is done as far as we ever do it, Mammy has our nursery ready for the baby, and Loll and I have all the pretty presents nicely arranged on the floor of our wardrobe."

"Let's count and see how many things we've got, and it'll make the time pass quicker," suggested Loll, now fully awake.

"Well, I made Father a pen-wiper out of chamois with 'F' worked on it in blue silk; and a pink satin handkerchief-case for Mama, with 'M' on it in white silk. Loll made her a sweet little sachet like my case, and Mammy helped her cover Papa's desk pad with new green felt. Loo carved him a paper-cutter, and Mama a pin-tray out of red cedar; and Lee a letter-rack and a needle case. So it won't be so bad after all."

"It's bad enough when you think what we could have bought if we only could have gone to Jacksonville," grumbled Loo.

"Haven't you got a thing for Althea?" asked Lee in dismay, when the list had been gone over the second time.

"Why, of course," answered Lona indignantly, "we helped Mama dress two of our prettiest little dolls for her."

"Listen!" cried Loll.

"It's the carriage!" screamed Loo. And sure

enough the lights of the barouche were twinkling merrily along the drive near the gates.

"Here they are! Here they are!" cried the girls dancing up and down in their joy, and the horses had barely stopped before they were all in their mother's arms, laughing and crying in delight.

"O, my babies! My darlings!" she whispered, gathering them to her heart.

"Mama, Mama, we're so glad you did come," joyfully sobbed the little girls.

"Why, where's Father?" asked Lee suddenly, looking anxiously towards the carriage.

"Hush, dearest, Althea is asleep. Poor little pet. She is worn out with grieving for her Mama, and weariness from the long journey. Father has her, and we'll take her up to Mammy and then come back to you, my sweethearts," replied his mother, walking towards the steps with her arms about them all.

Old Joe assisted Dr. Alvoyd to alight, and with a bright smile of welcome to his "Gipsies" he walked quietly up the broad stairs, bearing in his arms the most wonderful little creature the children had ever seen.

A soft, white velvet cloak covered a chubby little body; a pale baby face, peaceful in slumber, lay nestled against their father's shoulder, while over his arm fell a shower of waving golden curls. In perfect silence the twins watched the trio ascend

the stairs and, after the corner of the landing had hidden them from view, they drew close together near the grate and, still silent, waited until their parents came back alone.

When they had assembled in the dining-room to serve Mama and Father with a dainty lunch Lona thoughtfully had prepared, the story of the journey was told: how they had reached the hospital just in time to say "Good-bye" to Mama's dear friend; how they had soothed her breaking heart by taking her beloved baby in their arms and promising to make her their own; how they had buried her beside her young husband and two baby boys—and then the long, hurried trip home with the fretful, grieving orphan, who wanted nothing but—

"Mama! Mama!"

"Well," said their father, drawing Loll and Lona to his knee, while Mrs. Alvoyd with her arms about the boys, sat on a low seat at his feet. "What do you think of her?"

"Father," answered Lee solemnly, "she looks just like the orange-blossoms—all white and yellow and sweet."

"So she does, son, a dear little Northern blossom; that we all must join hands and hearts to love and protect, so she will take us into her life instead of the tender mother God has called home."

"We will, Father, we will!" they cried, and from their hearts they meant to keep their promise.

CHAPTER III.

ALTHEA.

CHRISTMAS morning dawned bright and beautiful. At the first stroke of five, Lee and Loo knocked softly on their sisters' door, and in one breath whispered, "Girls, come on with the presents."

In an instant the door flew open and their arms filled with the home-made gifts the sisters stole out.

"Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!" they cried, running into their parents' room and showering them with offerings, kisses, and loving wishes, for all the holy blessings of the Infant Christ.

"Forward, march! Down to the library and see what's there!" ordered Dr. Alvoyd mysteriously, after the first raptures.

At the jolly command the twins started pell-mell down the steps, but stopped suddenly on the first landing, dumbfounded with the sight that met their eyes.

For brilliant with myriad snowy lights was the loveliest Christmas tree in Florida. Strange glittering objects, rose and green colored balls, confec-tions in odd shapes and dear little candy boats, baskets, and animals covered the bending branches,

while hanging from the lowest bough was a large white card on which was written in letters of gold:

LOVE TO MY FOUR DEAR GIPSIES, WHO HAVE CHEER-
FULLY OPENED THE DOOR OF THEIR TENT TO
WELCOME A LONELY NORTHERN BLOSSOM!
MAY GOD BLESS AND LET NOTHING YOU DISMAY.
YOUR LOVING FRIEND,

NORTH POLE.

SANTA CLAUS.

"O, the darling old fellow! Jiminey! Mama, look!" broke from the children as they raced around the tree, for there were two beautiful baby coaches holding sweet, blue-eyed darlings, and four shining "wheels" told that, while Santa preferred riding in a sleigh himself, he permitted the use of bicycles to boys and girls.

"Lona, look!" cried Loll, in a rapt state of excitement, "my doll is all jointed and can stand alone!"

"So can mine," answered Lona, strutting around with an immense candy cane, her child tucked feet first under her arm.

"Father, what in the world is this funny table?" cried Lee, examining with lively interest a shallow green table with pockets at each end.

"I ordered that from Santa Claus in New York," answered his father, with a smile. "It's something you all can play."

"What is it?" cried Lona, as they gathered around.

"It's a pool table, and a splendid 'rainy-season' sport."

"O goody!"

"Show us how to play it now, Father, please," and in two minutes the five were deep in the mysteries of the new game.

After hours of wild confusion and joy Mrs. Alvoyd said seriously, "Babes, it is almost time for breakfast, and I'm going up for Althea. Be very gentle and loving with her; the poor little thing is grieving herself ill for her mother. She is too young to understand death, and has called piteously for her Mama all night."

"We did not tell her that to-day was Christmas, hoping the surprise would help to keep her mind from her homesickness and make her introduction to you all the easier. Show her the tree and her gifts; those on the piano are hers. By that time she ought to be pretty well acquainted," added Dr. Alvoyd.

The children, sobered by the knowledge of the little stranger's grief, waited quietly beside him until their mother came back with the little sister. They all hesitated as the lovely child came towards them. Mammy had dressed her beautifully for their first meeting and she looked to the "Gipsies" like a Christmas fairy. Pink silk socks and slippers encased her chubby little feet; a frock of soft white lace fell in full folds from her throat to her

graceful little knees ; while far below her waist, and shadowing the deep blue eyes, hung those wonderful golden curls.

"Dearest," said Mrs. Alvoyd tenderly, "here are the big brothers and sisters Uncle Irvy told you about. Won't you kiss them?" she asked half reproachfully, as the little girl looked up shyly, but kept tight hold of her hand, and seemed ready to cry.

Lolly, forgetting that she might be displeasing Loo, dropped her doll and holding out her arms to the frightened child, said sweetly, "Come to Lolly, darling."

"Me wants my Mama," sobbed Althea, as she crept into the outstretched arms, and hid her face on her new friend's shoulder.

The entire family seemed on the point of tears now, and were only saved by Doctor Alvoyd saying gayly,

"Look here, before we go to breakfast Althea must see the dolls Santa Claus left on the Christmas tree for her."

"Is to-day Twismas?" asked the child looking up, and forgetting her strangeness in her surprise.

"Why, of course it is. Didn't you know that?" cried Lona, merrily.

"And old Santa Claus left you the loveliest presents on the piano, and on our Christmas tree too," added Lee.

The tears were dried in a moment, and peal after peal of soft laughter broke from the little lips, as the boys presented each toy with a deep bow and comical speech.

Mrs. Alvoyd's stratagem worked splendidly, and Althea seemed blissfully content, with her pretty toys and — Lolly, from whose side she would not stir.

So before the happy Christmay Day was over Althea, or "Blossom," as Uncle Irving called her, was "Queen" of the Gipsies of Rosemont. Mammy carried her off to "by-low" just before the evening gaieties began, and she slept peacefully, worn out with the long day of excitement, until the whole plantation had settled quietly to rest. But when Aunty passed the nursery door on her last round, to see if all were well, a low moan brought her to the small white bed in the corner, and there sobbing softly to herself lay the homesick child.

People who believe four-year-old men and women incapable of such prolonged grieving have only to spend the first weeks after a devoted, tender mother has been laid to rest, and try to soothe the awful cries of the lonely bewildered little hearts, that cannot understand why "Mama," who had always come at the faintest call, stays and stays away when they want her so much.

There is something pitiful in a strong man's grief; but there is something appalling in the unreasoning

grief of a little child. After wearying efforts to comfort the lonely baby heart, a happy thought came to Mrs. Alvoyd.

"Lolly," she whispered softly, bending over her sleeping daughter in the room beyond the nursery, "I dislike to awaken you, dear, but please come and see if you can put Althea to sleep. We can't quiet her, and I'm afraid she will fret herself into a fever."

Loll stumbled sleepily into the nursery, and, cuddling down in the narrow bed, took the child in her arms.

"My Lolly," murmured Althea drearily.

"Yes, darling, Lolly's here. My pretty lamb, my precious dove." And the soft words of love from the little southern sister stilled the baby's wailing cry for the dead northern mother. So, often in the first weeks which followed her coming to Rosemont, no one but Lolly could soothe the little girl's heart-breaking cry of "Mama, Mama, me want you."

Loo overcame his aversion for the newcomer very quickly after he saw her in her true loveliness Christmas morning, and gladly joined the others in trying to amuse and keep her happy; but, when Althea showed so great a love for Loll and would not leave her for a moment, he grew wrathful again and dark times settled over Rosemont.

On a bright sunshiny afternoon late in January he saw, from the school-room window, Lee leave

the barn with a basket. "Where are you going, Lee?" he called.

"Lona and I are going to row down to the south grove and get Mama some grape-fruit."

"Say, wait a minute and I'll get Loll and come too."

"All right—but hurry."

"Loll! Loll!" Loo called, running through the hall. "Come on—let's go rowing. Lee and Lona are."

"Goody. It's so warm and I'm dying for some fun," answered Loll, hopping down the stairs two steps at a time.

"Lollie, tate me woing," said a little voice from behind the high banister and Althea trotted after them.

"No, you can't go. Run back to Mammy," ordered Loo crossly.

"I'm ain't doing back to Mammy," answered the child with a pout.

"Oh, let her come, Loo. It's so nice and cool down under the trees and she's lonely, poor little thing," pleaded Loll.

"She'll not go in my boat," he answered unkindly.

"Come along, Pet, and if Lee won't take you I'll stay home too," and it took all Loll's strength to utter her defiance bravely for she was naturally so gentle and yielding.

Loo gave her one angry glance, then marched off with an injured air leaving the little girls to follow alone.

"Naughty Loo!" prattled Althea skipping along by the side of the friend she was always getting into trouble. "Me don't love Loo."

"Oh, yes you do," corrected Loll, for while she was angry with her peppery twin no one else must be.

"Well, he don't love me," persisted her little companion; for babies far quicker than men and women discover who do and who do not love them.

"Yes, he does," answered Loll absently, for her thoughts were busy with plans to prevent any more scenes like that which had just taken place, and which were growing more frequent every day.

"Does you love me?" questioned the child artfully.

"You know I do, dear."

"Well den," triumphantly, "you don't talk a' me dat way."

"Why, what way? What do you mean, Blossom?" Althea stopped in the middle of the path and tossing back her golden head in Loo's haughty manner said in a cross voice — "She sant do in my boat!"

Loll looked at the little mimic in silent astonishment, but wishing to make her forget Loo's new unkindness said gaily, "We had better run or they may leave us behind."

"Hello!" said Lee, as they came racing over the smooth white boards of the landing. "Where did Blossom come from?"

"Loll tagged her," grumbled Loo from his boat. "You'll have to take her. I won't."

"I'm willing. Come here, Allie, and sit quiet as a mouse beside Lona. Now, don't move around or we'll all take a bath with our clothes on," he laughed brightly, helping her to a place beside his twin in the stern.

"Say," asked Loo, shamed into good humor by his brother's kindness. "Are we going down to the 'W' (which meant the wreck) soon?" For, though unable to visit the "Secret" on account of the many gaieties, none of them had forgotten it.

"We're going to-morrow. Mama said this morning she would give us ten cents a dozen for crabs for her company to-morrow night, so that's a good chance to get off the whole afternoon."

"Don't you think we ought to tell her or father?" asked Loll anxiously.

"I did tell her we were going to have some fun about a secret, and she said, 'all right, only don't get hurt.' So that's all hunky-dory."

After a long row and a merry time the children came back to the wharf.

"You see," said Loll, walking up to the house with Loo, while the other pair, with Althea squeezed into the big basket of fruit, came tugging it merrily

along the ground, "Althea was as good as could be, and never bothered us at all. It's really cruel for you to treat her the way you do," she added sorrowfully.

"I don't care if it is," he replied in a gruff voice, but with a sidelong glance of dismay at his twin. "I don't want her along every time we stir; I'd like it if we could be like we used to—just us four alone, once in a while, anyway," he added quite gently.

You four will be alone many times, Loo dear, when you would give—oh anything for a sight of that dear golden head.

CHAPTER IV.

LOST.

“**B**ABES,” said Mrs. Alvoyd, at the breakfast table the next morning, “I’m going into Avalon about ten o’clock and if I have time I will drive down to Court Ledge and call upon the lady who has come to live there.”

“Why, are there people living at Court Ledge?” asked Lee in a surprised voice, for a beautiful deserted plantation three miles down the river had always been a spot of delightful mystery to the Rosemont children. The house had been closed so long that weird stories had grown with the moss and vines about its turrets and walls.

“Yes,” replied his mother; “a northern lady and her son have come to live there. Father has met the young boy several times and seems to think very highly of him.”

“A little friend at Court Ledge would be pleasant for you all,” said Dr. Alvoyd, turning to Lee, “and he rides like a young Cossack.”

“What is his name?” asked Lona.

“Max Melody,” answered her father with a smile at her sudden interest.

“What does he look like?” inquired Loll, to whom looks meant a great deal.

"A hearty lad with a very serious face for a boy of fifteen; but he has wonderfully merry blue eyes and an easy cultured manner that is quite winning. It seems he was born and raised in Europe, but his parents were of American birth. I've taken a great fancy to him and want you boys to go down there sometime this week. Professor Morgan has been engaged to tutor him also this winter, so that will help to bring you together, for I imagine the lad is rather lonely in that great place with only an invalid mother as companion.

"We will, father; I'd love to go," answered Lee enthusiastically, for he was just of an age to want to spread his wings a bit beyond the safe home nest.

"Oh, dear, I wish some of us had blue eyes or golden hair! Everybody nice has them; there's Mama and Althea and now this Max," moaned Lona, rumpling up her dusky locks.

"I'd rather have my sturdy gipsy daughters with their shadowy eyes and soft dark curls than all the pink and white little maidens in Florida," laughed her father as he kissed the rosy lips good-bye.

"It's good you're satisfied; we're just like you," said Loll drolly, putting her arms around his neck as he stooped to bid her farewell for the day, for Dr. Alvoyd was a busy man, with patients scattered over many miles of plantation lands, and was often away many hours at a time.

"I think we are both satisfied," he laughed as he

walked out on the veranda with his arm about their mother.

"Babes, here comes Mr. Morgan. Don't keep him waiting," called Mrs. Alvoyd.

"Oh, good — let's get through our lessons as fast as we can," cried Lee, folding up his napkin six ways for Sunday.

"Why do you want to be through so quickly, dear?" asked his mother, stepping back into the room through one of the low French windows.

"We're going crabbing right after dinner and we want to start early enough to have lots of time for the 'W' secret."

His mother just smiled and said calmly,

"Remember you promised to have the crabs here in time for Delphy to make the salad." She was used to the secrets; A's, Y's and M's had often played a great part in the children's frolics, but they had always proved such innocent mysteries she and her husband had decided to enter the sport by not being curious, and soon found they were told in the end and usually enjoyed the grand exposé as much as the rascals themselves.

"Hurry, boys, Mr. Morgan has gone up stairs," she said turning to give Althea a kiss, for the little girl had just come down and was standing quietly by the door waiting to be noticed.

"How are you, my pet?" she asked as she lifted the child to a high-chair. The baby was to her not

only a darling child, but her beloved Althea's sad legacy.

"I'se tired," answered the child, leaning her head on her hand.

"Tired! Little lazy-bones, you are just up," laughed Aunt Tudy, merrily.

"My feet is tired, not my eyes," and Althea looked dolefully at her tiny slippers.

"They're not awake yet. Drink your milk, love, and I'll take you to the stable to see a wee baby cow; that will wake them up, for he's pretty and cunning as can be."

But many times in the dark days that followed, poor Mrs. Alvoyd wished with her whole heart that she had understood what the child meant when she said "her feets, not her eyes were tired." For then "Auntie" would not have left her that morning.

* * * *

The room where the twins studied was large and airy, and filled with objects of interest to school-life; flags, globes, pictures, flowers, and maps covered the walls and windows. Five hours each day were given to work; but when the school-room door closed, they were free. Professor Morgan, a grave young Northerner, whom failing health had driven from his beloved, but rigorous, Harvard winters to the December summers of Florida, was their teacher — and his four mischievous pupils,

while they tantalized the life out of him, dearly loved him.

"Loll," whispered Loo, when the other pair were deep in the glories of the surrender at Yorktown, "don't you say anything about this afternoon before Althea; for, if she goes I shan't. She'll tattle the whole thing."

"O Loo, I think it'll be mean to leave her to play alone all day," Loll answered reproachfully.

"She didn't have someone playing with her all the time, like you do, when she was home," he retorted angrily.

"She had her mother, then, and that was all she wanted," replied Loll gently.

Loo flushed sullenly, for the shaft struck deep, but he wanted to act unkind about Althea before the rest. He did not want anyone to know how much he resented her love for Loll and timid indifference to himself. He loved the little, golden-haired girl more than he'd admit; but he had acted so cold and unkind to her from the first that he seemed afraid, and never caressed or romped with him as she did with the others. He was too proud to ask anyone to help him make her love him too, and even his mother, who understood so much, did not know that her boy's heart was full of misery. Loo could not go back and begin over again, so just plunged on, getting deeper and deeper into trouble and pain.

"Loll Alvoyd, if you take her along you'll spoil

all my fun, for I won't go if she does," he replied angrily. "And I'll pay you off——"

"Lucillian," interrupted Professor Morgan quietly, "if you know the geography, study the spelling; but I want you to stop talking."

Loo turned to his book, but he was excited, angry, and miserable, and when the recitation was called said that Philadelphia was the capital of Pennsylvania, and that the Mississippi River drained the Ohio valley.

"Take the spelling now, Lucillian," said Mr. Morgan sternly, "but recite this to me after dinner."

"Never mind, we'll wait for you," whispered Lee sympathetically.

But the lessons all went wrong, and when the bell rang for dismissal the geography had still to be learned. Dinner was not a success spiritually. Mama and Father were both away; Mr. Morgan seemed tired; Loo was cross; Loll quiet and thoughtful, for Althea begged and teased her to make 'just one little bitta dress right after dinner, because her baby was freezing!'

"I'll try, dear," answered Loll wearily.

Lee and Lona were giggling over something that was amusing them mightily, and were the only ones in good humor.

"Lucillian, I will hear the geography now," said Mr. Morgan, as they rose from the table.

"Yes, sir," he replied respectfully.

"Loo," called Lona from the garden; "we'll wait for you at the end of the wharf. Loll has everything ready in your boat."

"I'll be there in a little while," he answered, and turning his book studied hard for ten minutes, and then recited his lesson slowly and perfectly.

"That's better," said Professor Morgan, kindly. "What was the trouble with you before? You looked like a thunder-cloud all morning," he added with a smile.

"I was angry about a secret; but it's all right now. Good-bye!" and Loo tore down the steps — to run straight before Althea coming through the side hall.

"Where's Lollie?" asked the child, covering tightly in her arms a doll without any clothes. "She said she'd dwess my baby, and now I tant find her."

"Loll's going with me, Blossom dear, but she'll make a fine one for you to-morrow," he replied kindly, for there was no one about to hear.

"Is you doing woing?" demanded Althea, looking up into his merry dark eyes, with her blue ones wreathed in smiles.

Loo was just going to say, "Yes, and you can come too, if you want;" but a wicked little voice deep down in his heart suddenly whispered, "Wouldn't they laugh if you came tagging her along," so he ran out of the door saying over his shoulder,

"Never mind where we are going. Be a good girl and perhaps I'll take you next time."

"O tate me in de boat now, Looy. Me wants to do now," pleaded Althea running after him as fast as her short little legs could carry her. But Loo raced on — leaving her far behind, though he could still hear her sobbing call, "O please, Looy, wait fo' me."

As he reached the steps leading down to the wharf, he looked back, and saw her standing in front of the rose-arbor crying; he paused to call her to "come on"—but just then Lee spied him and shouted impatiently, "Oh, hurry up there! We can't wait all night."

"Well, I'm here now, so pull away," he answered breathlessly, jumping in beside Loll. So the precious moment passed, and with it the happiness of many long weeks.

An hour's steady rowing brought the light skiffs to the old bridge.

"What'll we do first, crab or explore?" asked Lona, naughtily rocking their boat.

"You'll flop out of here the first thing, if you keep that up," cried Lee angrily, as she was preventing him from tying the boat to the post, for every time he obtained a good hold the prow would raise up, and leave him where he had started.

"Oh, let's go through the 'W' now," cried Loo.

"All right, but I'll be the leader and go into every

place before the rest of you—so if anything happens (this darkly) you can get out. Loo you come next to me and you girls stay together," said Lee, as they scrambled up the rickety stairs, and then stood peering down the tangled path which led for miles back into the dreary swamp.

"Listen! how terribly quiet it is," cried Lona, for Lee had been relating the wildest stories of murder, piracy, and treasure by the ship-load on the way down.

He was the bookworm of the family and was well versed in the ship lore of Cooper's Sea Tales; and the romances, to which he had added some of his own, had given even the familiar old bridge a delightful aspect of mystery.

"It is awful lonely. There might be some dead people in that old place," suggested Loll, holding on tight to Lona's hand and creeping nearer to the boys.

"Oh, come on, and don't be a baby," cried Lee, opening the entrance to the path with one sweep of his strong young arms, and starting off fearlessly, while the others followed in silence, peering here and there.

"Ship ahoy!" shouted Lee, so suddenly that Loll screamed in terror.

"O! O! There she is," cried Loo, and breaking into a run they were soon to "windward" of the old gray hull.

"How will we ever get on top?" asked Lona.

"Easily," replied Lee; "Loo and I'll climb up and look around for a piece of rope or something to haul you girls up with."

"Why can't we climb up the way you do?" she asked, for Lona didn't like being "hauled" anywhere.

"You'd tear your dresses all to bits getting 'round these sharp boards. Just wait a second; we'll have you here too," for while they had been talking he and Loo scaled the side like a pair of young monkeys, and were prancing about on the rotten deck.

"Now don't you go in until we come," ordered Lona, who wanted some of the glory of a discovery if there was going to be one.

"We won't. You take hold of this rope and put your feet in the broken places and when we pull walk right up."

"O! Och!" she cried, for the tarry rope cut deeply into her plump little hands; but she held on bravely until with one last jerk she was safe beside her brothers.

"O hurry, Loll, it's grand up here," she cried, hopping from one broken board to another.

"Lolly, you make a loop and put your foot in it," Loo called down. "It'll be easier that way," for Lona had stopped to show them the red marks on her hands.

After a few moments of pulling and slipping and laughing they all stood together in the bow.

"My gracious! How do you suppose such a great big ship ever got way up here?" asked Loo as they marched around the top of the cabin.

"I know," said Lona. "Father told me that years and years ago during a terrible storm, that lasted most a week, the sea flooded all this swamp so high that big boats could have sailed almost up to Avalon. He said the whole coast was just covered with wrecks and lots of poor sailors were drowned——"

"Oh!" screamed Loll jumping off the roof, "maybe some one is dead in there," pointing, with trembling finger, into the dark hold.

"Well, here goes. If they're down there I'm going to see 'em," and Lee gave the cabin door a quick push with both hands—Slam! bang! and flying off the rusty hinges it fell back into the room.

The twins flew to the end of the boat in terror.

"What was that!" whispered Loll, shivering with fright.

"Nothing! The old thing's going to pieces, and everything you touch falls down," answered Loo, laughing, and following Lee back to the dark doorway.

Cautiously they went on, until Lee shouted, as he hopped bravely down into the bare room, "Come on, it's all right! This room was the cabin," he ex-

plained airily, "where the captain kept the ship's log and lived."

"With the log?" asked Lona, wickedly, for she dearly loved to tease, especially Lee, for unlike Loo he took her tormenting very calmly, and seldom "paid her back."

"Yes, they say they're nice company for stormy weather, good things to tie to, in case of any reason for swimming ashore," he replied in the friendliest way possible.

"Well, there's nothing in it," complained Loo, in a disappointed tone.

"Shall we go down in the hold? Maybe the skeletons and jewels are hidden there," suggested Lee, Captain Kid and various other lawless gentlemen of his literary acquaintance coming to his mind.

"Seeing we've started, we might as well finish it up with a flourish," bantered Lona.

"My, it's dark as Egypt down here," cried Loll, as she followed the rest down the narrow ladder, and stood trembling at the entrance of the dreary place.

"Wait a minute and I'll knock out this little door and get enough light to see what the place looks like anyhow," and picking up a belaying pin Loo hit a cracked panel a sounding blow and to the horror and amazement of the four a crash of breaking glass followed, and a thin ray of sunlight pierced the gloom.

"Let's get out of this," cried Lee, and they fairly tumbled over one another in getting up the narrow, steep ladder.

"What — do — you — think that was?" asked Loll, as they stood scared to death on the sunny deck.

"A jewel case," promptly responded Lee, whose usually calm mind had taken a romantic turn all of a sudden.

"Let's go back and get them for mama," proposed Lona, much reassured by the daylight and the fact that an army of skeletons had not materialized from the dark interior.

"O please don't go down into that dreadful place again," begged Loll, to whom the breaking glass had sounded like the judgment call.

"I dare you to, Lee," said naughty Lona, to whom the excitement was glorious.

"Do you think I'm afraid!" cried that young gentleman scornfully, "one for the money, two for the show, three to make ready, and four to go," he sang, and at "go" led the way down again at break-neck speed; and standing on tip-toe they saw that Loo's blow had broken open a glass box, and sure enough in the midst of the shattered pieces, lay a small oval case. Jumping up Lee grasped it, and in a second they were back on the deck again.

"There is something in it!" he shouted gleefully, as he shook the case gently and they heard a faint rattling.

"Oh, oh! Maybe we can open it!" cried Loo, jumping up and down, as Lee turned it over gingerly.

"Yes, sir; look at that little bump, press it like father's watch," exclaimed Loll.

Lee pressed the catch hesitatingly — then almost dropped the whole affair; for the lid flew back with a spring and Baby Althea's dear little face smiled out at them from an exquisitely painted miniature.

"It's Althea!" broke from the children in an amazed chorus, as the sunlight fell softly on the lovely childish face, which smiled up as though in welcome after her long, long sleep in the darkness. Under the picture was written in a man's hand,

"**MY MOLLY.**"

"Look!" cried Loll, pointing to the inside of the lid, "there's something written there too."

"Molly," read Lee solemnly, straining his eyes to read the engraving almost obliterated by time.

"DIED JUNE 25th, 1778,
Aged three years and two months.
Brighton, England."

"O dear!" cried the girls at the thought of the beautiful baby, peacefully sleeping in some forgotten little grave in far away England.

"You'd think it was Althea as sure as life!"

"I never read anything so strange," exclaimed Lee.

"Won't mama and papa and Althea be surprised?" cried Loo.

"It's a great deal better than jewels," said Loll, softly, as Lee gave it to her to take care of, after they had all looked at it a hundred times.

And she was right — for the rare painting of the dead little maiden was the only treasure a lonely man had kept to remind him of five happy years in a sunshiny cottage on the English coast. But, that his little "Molly" was the perfect image of their "Althea," was not so strange, as great resemblances among small children are not rare.

"O come on, boys, let's go," said Lona at last. "We'll never get the crabs and we promised mama we would."

"All right. Perhaps father will let Joe come with us to-morrow and go through the whole thing," agreed Lee, swinging himself over the rail and down the rope before the rest had fully decided what they were going to do.

"Let's bring Althea if we come to-morrow," said Loo, to the amazement of his brother and sisters, as they were walking back to the bridge, for all through the fun and frolic of the afternoon, and especially since the finding of "Molly's" picture, his heart had reproached him, and the sweet little voice calling so faintly, "Pease, Looy, wait fo' me," had rung constantly in his ears.

"I'll be John Browned! What's come over you,"

laughed Lee. "All kinds of things were going to happen if we dared to bring her this afternoon, and now you want to bring her yourself——" but he added good-naturedly, "sure we'll bring her. I think she's fine."

"She's a sweet little baby, but doesn't she say funny things? Did you hear her tell me not to make her nervous, when I was walking upstairs on the outside of the banisters with her doll on my head? Nervous! That three-year-old babylink!" and Lona made them all laugh by mischievously mimicking Althea's motherly little tone.

Loll, who had kept very silent, now looked bravely at Loo and said quietly, "I'd love to have her with us all the time. She's really our sister now. Father said so."

"We'll never get any crabs if we lag along this way," exclaimed Loo quickly, anxious to change the subject.

"I'll give her my red ball and be so good to her to-night she'll have to love me, too," he resolved again and again on their way to the bridge. The crabs were wary and it was later than they had intended when the bags and nets were finally stowed in Lee's boat and they were ready to start home.

"Hurry up, Loo!" Lee called back warningly to his brother, as he and Loll stood on the steps wrestling for possession of the oars. "The tide is going out mightily fast and see how dark it's getting

over in the East. Stop your fooling now and come on."

"I'll take one and you the other, Loo, for just see how fast the current is," and Loll jumped in and took her place on the oar bench.

"Oh, we'll get to the first landing anyway, so don't rush so," Loo answered calmly; but it was hard work, even with Lolly's help, to go up stream and they barely had time to moor the boats and race to the house before the first big drops began to fall.

"My!" laughed Lona, sinking into the hammock, while the rest piled in on top of her; "I never saw a storm come up so quickly or it get so dark; why it's only five o'clock and it's almost as dark as at seven."

"Why, there's mama!" exclaimed Loll in surprise, as Mrs. Alvoyd appeared in the doorway.

"O Mama!" they cried rushing to her, and all talking at once, "you never heard such high jinks as we've got to tell. Look what we found in the 'W' secret. O Loll, where is it?" cried Lona in dismay, for Loll was fishing around in her blouse for the treasure that was coasting about just out of reach.

"My darling, I hope it's not something alive," laughed their mother, for she never knew just what to expect.

"Oh, it's nothing alive. It's something to keep

and keep," cried Lona, dancing up and down impatiently, while Loo went to his twin's assistance and soon fished out the little black case.

"What do you think of this?" and Lee tremblingly displayed to his mother's startled eyes the lovely portrait of "Molly," while the others danced around, fairly screaming with delight at her surprise.

"Why, it's Althea!" gasped Mrs. Alvoyd, taking the old case in her hand. "Babes, where did you find this?" she demanded, before noticing the engraving, for she thought they had been to Althea's big trunk in the attic, and which she, herself, had not thoroughly examined. Breathlessly they told the "secret" and of the afternoon's adventure that had so strangely brought to their hands a keepsake of the past, but which was to be to them a talisman of sorrow.

"You did very wrong to go to a place of that kind alone, children. You are too young to understand the danger of such expeditions, but there must never be another secret of this kind. Father will be so displeased at you leaving the bridge. I thought he had forbidden it," said their mother seriously.

"No, Mama, he didn't. Nobody ever said anything about not leaving the bridge," said Lee, who was always the leader in mischief, but also the first to take the blame.

"Very well, then, if he didn't, but — go to Mam-

my, dearies, so you'll be ready for tea when he comes. I'll keep this to show him — it's beautiful, but I wish you had not gone there alone. What did Althea say about it?" she asked with a smile, as the twins, rather soberly, rose to obey her.

"Althea!" cried Lona, in astonishment. "Why, Mama, Althea wasn't with us."

"Not with you!" exclaimed her mother, starting to her feet. "She was not here when I returned an hour ago, but Joe said he had seen her going down to the boathouse with you, Loo. Wasn't she with you?" she asked anxiously.

"She — she ran after me — but I — I didn't wait," the boy stammered, his heart beating with a sudden, wild fear.

"What do you mean, that you did not wait? You surely did not let her go away from the house and then leave her, did you?" she asked sternly, and with such a cold look in her soft blue eye that Loo's heart almost stood still with terror.

"O, yes I did — yes I did!" he screamed, going towards her with his head thrown back, as though inviting any punishment that would take the pain from his heart.

"She — wanted to go — crabbing with us and — I — wouldn't — let — her and when she saw me going — she — ran after — me down the garden, — but I got to the — boathouse and — we — started — long before she — could have reached it. Of

course — I thought she'd — go back to Mammy, when — she — saw — me — go — down — the — steps——” and Loo could get no further, but leaned breathlessly against the balustrade, the most miserable boy in the world.

“Oh, my son, my son!” began Mrs. Alvoyd, sorrowfully holding her arms out to her boy; all the anger and pain gone from the dear eyes, while only loving pity shone on him now; but a sudden, fearful peal of thunder startled them, and the storm which had been gathering broke in all its fury.

“Mother,” asked Loo, calmly, but with a pale, frightened face, “are you sure she's not with Mammy or somewhere in the house?”

“Very sure,” replied Mrs. Alvoyd, pacing up and down the veranda, clasping and unclasping her hands nervously. “I didn't think she had gone with you and we were looking for her when Joe came and said he saw her go off with you. What shall we do, children, what shall we do!” she cried, as the storm grew louder.

“Mama,” said Lee, putting his arm around her, “Father will be back shortly and until then, Loo, Joe, and I will hunt in the barns, boathouse and gardens. She might have gone to sleep somewhere. We'll find her, so don't worry,” he added cheerfully. Father never let anything worry Mama, and he wouldn't.

“Yes, dear, that is all we can do until father

comes," answered his mother helplessly. "While you're out there though, we can search the house and attic."

As they separated the storm waxed stronger; the darkness grew darker; the rain, driven by a wild northeast gale, came down in long, steady streams, and thunder and lightning made the night hideous with ghastly light and fearful noise.

Every gust brought to the searchers in the house the frantic cry of "Althea! Althea!" from the searchers in the gardens.

Leona and Lucille clung to their mother as she went hurriedly from room to room looking into every nook and corner.

"See, the boys have taken lanterns. I'm so glad," she said as they stopped before the school-room windows. "If she is lost on the grounds anywhere, poor little darling, they'll find her."

"Why, Mama, she couldn't leave the grounds, could she?" asked Loll, tremulously, thinking of the gates, fully a mile away.

A reply rose to Mrs. Alvoyd's lips, but she checked it in time to spare the little girls the horrible fear that assailed her heart — the creek.

"Come, daughters, let's go to the bay-window in my room. We can see the lanterns and watch for father at the same time. O, if God would only send him home," she sobbed, "I can't leave you — and I can't——"

"What's that?" she cried, starting up, as the sound of running on the porch below came to them through the storm.

"Mama," called Lee's voice unsteadily. "She is not in this part of the garden—but we see the lights of Father's buggy down the road; he'll be here in a minute to tell us what to do."

"Thank God!" answered his mother as she ran down, followed by the little girls.

When Dr. Alvoyd came into the bright hall he found her and the children with white, frightened faces grouped near the grate in the most helpless terror.

"Why, little girl," he cried, as Mrs. Alvoyd flew to his outstretched arms with a sob, and the children, all crying, gathered about them, "what in the world has happened?"

"O Irving, Irving!" she sobbed, "we can't find Althea."

"Can't find Althea," he repeated slowly, looking from one to the other in amazement.

"She's lost, Papa," broke in Lee. "Mama was away and we thought Althea was with Mammy Clar, and Mammy thought her with us. No one has seen her since about one o'clock."

"Where was she then?" questioned his father calmly, the situation becoming clear, and a plan of action at once forming in his mind.

Loo came close to him and standing quite still,

looked up into the dear, kind face, and told falteringly, though bravely, the honest truth.

"Father, it's my fault she is lost. I saw her — last. She wanted to go rowing with us and — and I wouldn't let her. I didn't know my geography this morning, so — while — while Lee and the girls went down to get the boats ready, I had to say it after school to Mr. Morgan. Then — then when I started down I met Althea and she ran after me; but when I got to the landing steps I looked back and she was standing still in front of the arbor — crying. Of course I thought she would come back to Mammy — when she saw me go down the steps — but — she — didn't — she didn't and Oh, Father! what shall I do! what shall I do!" and the boy leaned against his father's arm, his whole body shaking with wild sobs of shame and sorrow.

"Lucillian," said his father gravely, but putting his arm tenderly around him, "your dislike for the little sister was very plain to Mama and me from the first; but we kept hoping you would be won, as all the rest of us were, by the sweet loveliness of the child——"

"I was, Papa," choked Loo, "I do love her; but I was ashamed to show it—because I said I wouldn't when Mama first told us she was coming. Oh, I do love her, and I can't stand it if she dies out in the storm!" he screamed, as a peal of thunder shook the house.

For a moment there was silence, broken only by the sobs of the children, then Dr. Alvoyd said soberly:

"It is no time for tears now, my son; you did not intend this to happen, and the suspense and grief we will all suffer until the little one is found will teach you a bitter lesson of the consequences of uncharitableness; and how quickly a small fault grows great with the least encouragement. But, cheer up, sonny dear, and we'll find her very quickly, by searching the grounds. Joe," he called to the coachman, who with the other servants, wild-eyed and trembling, stood in the side entry, "saddle the horses, and bring them around as quickly as possible. Boys, put on your rubber caps and capes," he added briskly.

"Keep them with you, dearest," whispered Mrs. Alvoyd, following her husband into the study.

"I'll keep Loo, poor chap, with me," he answered gently, "but will have to send Lee with Joe to Avalon. They must stop at every house on the way."

"Irving, listen," she said tremulously, putting her arms around his neck and hiding her face on his coat, "have you—have you thought of the—creek?"

"I hoped that would be spared you, dear heart," he answered, kissing her softly; "but nothing can be done in that direction to-night, so don't think of

it. I'm sure we'll find her safe and sound somewhere."

As the party, all muffled and wrapped, started out into the storm, poor Mrs. Alvoyd stretched out her arms to the little girls, crying wildly, "O, daughters, daughters, where in God's world is that poor baby!"

"O don't, please don't, Mama," begged the children in terror; for when Mama cried the world was surely wrong.

"Missey," interrupted Mammy Clar's cheerful voice, as she came up the entry stairs, "shan't Delphy make some good strong coffee and tuffies for Mars Irvin' and the babies, when dey comes?"

"Yes, Mammy, I suppose they will want something warm to drink during the night—if they find her or not," she said wearily.

And so they did; once at midnight and again at three, Dr. Alvoyd sounded the call and assembled the searchers on the veranda for refreshments, and a change of orders.

"Not yet," were the hopeful messages he sent back again and again to the weary watchers in the house.

At one o'clock he sent the boys home to rest.

"You'll need all your strength to-morrow, I fear," he said anxiously, his mind full of solemn thoughts of the turning tides.

Worn out and miserable they crept up the front

steps, to be met at the top by their mother's white, anxious face; the two girls were fast asleep on the rug before the grate.

"Well?" she asked fearfully.

"Not yet;" and Lee shook his head mournfully as though sick of those two little words. Loo only pressed the soft hand that had tenderly taken his, but when they were in the warm, bright hall he cried piteously, "Oh, Mama, beg our dear Lord to let Father find her!"

"He will, darling, I'm sure someone will bring her home in the morning — she must have just wandered off to one of the places near here," she answered cheerily, helping them up to their big, warm beds.

"Mama," said Loo, sleepily, "please wake me at five o'clock. Father said I could come out to help him then. I must find her," he moaned, "I lost her — you know I did."

"No — no, my precious," whispered his mother, lovingly smoothing back the damp, dark curls from the burning little face, "don't feel that way, dearest, for we don't think so. And you surely believe mother?" Soothed by her love and tenderness, he whispered, "Yes," and fell into a restless sleep, his burning hands clasped tightly in hers.

CHAPTER V.

MAX MELODY.

"MOTHER, I'm going to ride over to Rosemont, some day this week. I have met Doctor Alvoyd several times in Avalon, and yesterday he said that his sons were coming down to see me soon. Just think of it — there are two sets of twins in the family, and there is a boy and a girl in each set! The elder pair are about a year younger than I am, and the others are nearly twelve."

"What a lively family they must be," replied Mrs. Melody, smiling at the thought of a household composed of four children so near one age.

"But how did you happen to speak to a stranger, dear?" she continued quietly.

"Why, the first time, I was standing near the post-office door, when Mr. Nilan called out, 'Mr. Max, here is a letter for Court Ledge,' and as I went back to get it a tall, fine-looking gentleman stepped forward and said, 'Pardon me, are you living at The Ledge? And when I said 'Yes,' he smiled, and held out his hand, saying in the friendliest way, 'I'm pleased to meet you, sir. We are good neighbors down here. My sons must meet you, only they both have better halves, whom they

are sure to bring with them.' 'What do you mean, sir?' I asked, thinking his sons were married. 'Both my boys have twin sisters, who are a good bit more than half to them,' he laughed. 'Lee is as tall but a little younger than you, I reckon, and he will be glad to know you. They have gay times up at Rosemont. I hope you'll become good friends,' he added very friendly, as he walked down to the mounting-block."

"Then you had better wait for the young people to call. It would hardly be correct for you, the stranger, to make the advances," replied his mother, whose eighteen years of European life had made a close adherent to the formalities of countries ruled by kings.

"Yes, I know; but I thought I'd just ride over on some excuse or other, for I'm awfully lonesome, Maudechen," and Max sighed gloomily.

The mother and son were alone, as they always were now, in the former's turret-chamber; a large airy room, dainty in lace and wicker, and with low French windows that overlooked the silvery St. Mary's.

Mrs. Melody lay quietly on a soft, roomy couch, while Max tramped restlessly back and forth in the deepening dusk. His mother was a beautiful, white-haired woman; an inch shorter and very much slighter than her fifteen-year-old boy.

Born of an aristocratic Northern family, Maude

Stockton forever lost their love when she married a "Slave-owner"—a Virginian. Both were exiled by their devotion; for Max Melody's family never forgave the blue-eyed little New Englander for winning the heart of their first-born son. So he took her away from it all, to lands beyond the seas, where the first happy year brought a baby boy, in the light of whose merry blue eyes the longing for "Home" in the little mother's heart soon died away forever, and the passing years made them happier and more blessed in their deep, true love.

Then came the accident to the steamship, that left Max fatherless at twelve, and the bright, active mother white-haired and crippled.

Three sorrowful, lonesome years they had spent traveling from country to country, trying the most famous physicians of Europe, until weary of the useless experiments Mrs. Melody came back to America, to take up the new life in the fair land her husband had so loved. Court Ledge plantation was a part of Max's inheritance, and here the heart-broken widow gladly came, hoping to spend alone with her grief the remaining years of her martyrdom.

Max was a splendid tall boy; with his father's firm, handsome face, and his mother's soft curly hair. His devotion to her was that of any good son for a tender mother; but he worshiped her with the worship of a sorrowing mother for a crippled child. He had to be husband, and son, and daughter.

"I know you are lonesome, dear," she answered to his impatience, "but next week Professor Morgan will commence your studies again, then with his companionship, and taking care of me, the time will not seem so long until fall; for I shall go North, too, when you enter the University."

"If you are well enough, Maudechen," Max answered gravely, "a year more or less will make little difference to me, and you seem better here, already. A whole year may work wonders as far as your health is concerned. The air here is so soft and balmy; it's really like Italy."

His mother did not answer, but with a deep sigh gazed sorrowfully across the river to the gold-laden groves beyond.

"Maudechen, did I tell you that Jasper found a fine boat in the lumber house?" he asked quite cheerily, after a pause. "I'm going to make a trip in it to-morrow."

"Be sure it's watertight, dear. Florida waters are noted for their treachery. Harmless looking ponds have been found to be fathomless, and the narrowest streams have had good-sized boats sink in them and never come up," replied his mother anxiously.

"O, it's safe now. I've had it in the creek for nearly a week and it's dry as a chip. I'm going to take a row around in the swamp; Jasper says it's crammed full of strange, beautiful flowers. I'll

gather and prepare them and in the evenings we can transfer them to our herbarium."

"Oh, I wish I could go with you! I'm so tired of lying here," cried Mrs. Melody bitterly.

"Don't, dearest! If I only could suffer it for you my life would be so happy," poor Max answered tenderly.

"That's the way I'd feel if it was you," his mother said, smiling faintly again; "it is the only way I bear it at all,— pretending I suffer it instead of you."

Max stopped beside the couch and gathering the wasted 'little form in his strong young arms, resumed his tramp,— though slower and more carefully. When the restlessness and pain became more than his mother could bear he would hold her close in his arms, and while repeating some favorite poem walk up and down the long rooms until the tired eye lids drooped and the numbed muscles relaxed.

"What shall it be to-night, dear?" he asked softly, after the first turn at the library door.

"Keats," whispered his mother wearily.

Then softly 'through the twilight of the great silent house, his full, boyish voice, blending with her low sweet treble, chanted the deep solemn beauties of the "Nightingale,"

"My heart aches, and a dreary numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk."

And until the faint, regular breathing of the precious burden pressed close to his aching heart rewarded his labor of love the boy continued his lonely march.

Late the next afternoon Max took the old boat out on his first expedition into Okefinokee Swamp. The creek that swept the eastern boundary of Court Ledge formed the principal thoroughfare through the marsh; but numberless little branches traversed in every direction, making an island here, a peninsula there, but all covered with a dense tangle of trees, palms, flowers, and moss of as many shades as the rainbow.

Max was an enthusiastic botanist, and took great delight in gathering the rare blossoms he had become familiar with in books.

He paddled around and around, picking and pulling until tired; then he ran the boat into a tiny cove and began to sort and arrange the posies in the press. As he was filling the last sheet, a low rumble of thunder sounded in the East, and before he had time to push down the clasp and gather his oars for the homeward pull the swamp was full of shadows, and big drops began to patter on the water.

"How infernally dark it gets in here before a fellow has time to turn around," he thought, pulling hard on the oars and sending the clumsy boat far out on the stream, finding when too late that

the tide was running out very rapidly, and the old boat with it.

"Dat dere creek don' leads to nowhar," Jasper had told him when he had first spoken of the trip.

"I guess that's where I'm bound for now," Max thought grimly, as the darkness deepened and the boat sped on. "Poor little mother," he groaned, "she'll be frantic with suspense. Oh, God help me go back to her!" he prayed.

With all his strength he tried to push the boat ashore, but again and again the counter-current caught it and he was back in midstream.

"The tide must have been going out when I came," he thought, "so the only thing to do is to wait until it's low enough to check the rapid flow; then perhaps I can make the shore!"

Waiting six hours alone in the awfulness of a Florida swamp during a Nor'easter was fearful to even a brave boy; but six hours suspense in her prison-chamber was almost death to the mother at Court Ledge.

When the boat finally settled down to gentle tossing, instead of its wild careening, Max carefully guided it as near the left bank as possible, and reaching far out grasped a sweeping branch of cypress, and with one steady pull ended his miserable voyage on a sand-bar four miles from home.

The utter darkness and awful silence would have caused him greater nervousness, if the thought of

his mother's anxiety had not driven other thoughts from his mind.

"Why didn't I have sense enough to think of the confounded tide," he thought gloomily. "Jupiter! How quiet it is. I wonder how it would sound if I shouted." And suiting the act to the thought he gave a hearty cry of "Ship ahoy!" Ship ahoy — ahoy — hoy! echoed every twig with a sound like mocking laughter; but with the last echo the low whine of a dog floated over the water.

"Goodness! What's that!" cried Max, springing to his feet. For a moment the awful silence reigned supreme; then again he heard the dismal howl.

"Good old boy. Come on; that's a good fellow," he coaxed, but received only a suppressed whine in reply.

"Come here, sir!" he commanded, hoping to locate the animal, for each howl had seemed nearer, and to his relief a quick, sharp bark answered almost beside him, and something grazed the stern of his boat.

Leaping forward Max grasped the side of a long flat yawl, and drawing it alongside lighted a match and dimly made out a picture that struck him dumb with amazement. Faintly outlined against the wet shaggy coat of a dog lay a little child; her white, tear-stained face pressed close against the dog's paws that were extended to protect the golden head from the hard boards.

"Holy smoke! Where did you come from?" cried Max, as he lifted the child in his arms. The moment he was released, the dog, barking joyfully, leaped into Max's boat; as if to show that while delighted to see his charge in human arms, he, personally, had no intention of leaving her.

Max sat down in the bow with the little girl in his lap, while the dog stood before them, answering every exclamation and question with a contented growl or wag of his bushy tail; but where they came from or how they came, only the small white lips could have told — but they were very still.

Max held the child for quite a time, pondering and wondering over his strange discovery, before the fact that the little clothes were dripping wet broke upon him.

"She'll die if she stays in these wet things much longer," he said thoughtfully. "What'll we do, old boy?" The dog put his head on Max's knee, and looking up into his face whined as though he understood perfectly the helplessness of their situation.

"I can fix it!" Max exclaimed at last; and then fell to work quickly and quietly. First he slipped off the small, clinging garments and briskly rubbed the little limbs until even in the darkness he could feel them glow.

Then he took off his heavy boating blouse and slipping it over the soft little body, wrapped her up

warmly by tying the sleeves around her neck and gathering the ends about her feet with bits of tape he had torn off the flower-press. Holding the queer bundle awkwardly on his knees, he chafed the little face gently, and was soon rewarded by hearing a long sobbing breath and a baby voice say piteously, "Mama! Lollie! Me's 'faid in de dark."

"There — there, baby," soothed Max, wondering what she'd do when she came to and found herself alone with a big, strange boy.

"We'll go home to Mama right away," he promised hopefully, for the first ripples of the turning tide were breaking against the boat; but the child did not seem to hear, for she shivered and whispered through half closed lips, "Looy, please wait fo' me."

Max lighted another match and peered anxiously into the little face — but the eyes did not open and the fluttering breath came only in gasps. "Well, I wonder what's the matter with her. Is she sick — or just scared to death?" he muttered uneasily. "I wager her people will be hunting for her pretty soon; well," he said with a smile that ended in a groan, "if they only do they'll find me too, and perhaps I'll get home hours sooner than I expected." But no one came, and it seemed ages before the boat swayed enough to warrant the homeward pull.

"Lie still!" he ordered, placing the child with her head pillow'd as before on the dog's soft paws.

"We'll soon be home, old fellow," he cried cheerily, as he left the shelter of the cypress, and faced the pull up-stream.

To keep the boat in the center current was hard work; but the flow that carried him down must take him back, he reasoned, though again and again they ran into the banks, until suddenly the moon broke from behind the clouds, and Max sent the boat forward very quickly; but the calm did not last long and after it the storm seemed to gather fresh strength, for the wind blew fearfully and the rain came down in torrents. It was long past midnight when the lights of Court Ledge came into view.

"Thank God! I'll soon be there, dearest," he sobbed, giving away completely at the sight of the cheery little beacon shining dimly from his mother's turret.

Reaching the wharf, he threw the chain over a peg, and gathering the golden-haired waif in his arms, sprang with a shout to the good, solid ground. The dog seemed to feel it his bounden duty to keep the child in sight; for though he tore madly up the path, he stopped often to look back and make sure that Max was coming too.

Love and anxiety lent wings to the boy's feet, and ten minutes after they were on dry land, the half mile to the house was covered, and poor old Jasper, who had been patrolling the plaza, flew to his

mistress's room crying and laughing with joy; for the agony of suspense and pain the crippled mother had suffered that terrible night had well nigh sent the simple-hearted servants frantic with helpless grief — for not one could or would venture into Okefinokee Swamp during a storm at night.

"Mars' Max done come, missy, he done come alive right away dis minute sure!" Jasper shouted, as the boy came bounding up the stairs, and with the tears running down his face flew to his mother's arms. With a cry that pierced every corner of the old house Mrs. Melody gathered him close, in one fervent embrace — then lay back on the pillows very still.

"Dearest," whispered Max, "forgive me, forgive me! I was lost in that terrible place, and simply had to wait for the turn of the tide."

"Max," she answered faintly, her whole body quivering with pain, "I have been almost mad!"

"I know — I know and it almost made me so, to think of you suffering here alone. But listen, dear," he said quickly, knowing from of old that to lessen her pain he had to interest her in something outside of themselves; so kneeling with the poor, aching head on his shoulder Max related his adventures of the night.

"Where is the poor darling now?" demanded his mother eagerly, as he finished.

"Downstairs."

"O, Max, bring her to me," she ordered; for now that he was safe, her heart turned lovingly to the other dear castaway.

When Max went down, he found the negroes crowded about the still, small form on the big divan.

"Aunt Lucy, mother will want you," he said with a thankful look into her kindly black face as he took up the child and started back to his mother's room.

Then for a time all was confusion as the servants bathed, rubbed, and wept over the unheeding little flower "Mars Max" had found in Okefinokee.

"Call my son," Max heard his mother say, and as he stepped into the room he saw a pair of lovely, bright eyes illuminating the white face on the pillow beside her.

"Max," said Mrs. Melody, softly, "she has come out of the stupor, but is raving in fever. Poor darling, she must have been in that horrible place for hours, for she continually begs her Mama and some one named 'Lolly' to come to her — or keeps asking for some one to wait for her."

"She said that down in the swamp when I was holding her!" declared Max in alarm. It was fearful to think of her being unconscious all that time. She must be very, very sick.

"Well, we have done all we can, so now we must wait until morning; then Ned must go to Rosemont for 'your' Doctor Alvoyd."

"Maudechen, we can't wait till morning — she may die before then! I'll take Ned and row up right away — besides Dr. Alvoyd may know where she belongs," he added thoughtfully.

"Max, I forbid you to cross that awful creek tonight! I will not be left alone again. You must wait for daylight!" cried his mother, an agony of fear in her voice.

"Very well, dear," Max answered calmly, "but may we be ready to start at daybreak?"

"Yes," she assented more quietly, "it will be time enough then; for the fever must run its course and she is as comfortable as she could be at home, sweet love. How frantic her parents must be!" she added, with a quiver in her voice, her own pain fresh in her mind. "Doesn't Jasper know where she belongs? He ought to — he has been here all his life," she asked suddenly.

"No; he says he never saw nor heard of a child like her anywhere near here. If Dr. Alvoyd doesn't know who she is, her loss will be reported all over the state and we will find out where she belongs at the post-office."

At dawn Max whispered a few hurried instructions to Aunt Lucy and quietly left the room. Hurrying down he found Jasper and Ned waiting to drive him to the boat.

"Tie the horse and wait for me right here," he ordered, when they reached the landing, "for, if

possible, I'll bring the doctor back with me. Mother needs him as much as the little girl," he muttered; for after the pain and excitement Mrs. Melody had given away completely.

"Doctor Alvoyd will bless me — rousing him out in a storm like this and at such an unearthly hour," thought Max, as Ned sent the boat up-stream with rapid even strokes.

"Rosemont Landing" announced a small black and white sign as they rounded a big bend after almost an hour's hard row.

"Moor here and take shelter in the boathouse," directed Max, as he sprang out and started up the path on a dead run. As he came panting through the plaza — to his astonishment, the great front doors of the house were thrown open, and in the dull gray dawn a lady and two boys, fully dressed, hurried out to meet him.

"Is Doctor Alvoyd at home?" he asked, breathlessly.

"Oh, I thought you were bringing us word of our little girl!" cried Mrs. Alvoyd, so worn out with the night's anxiety that she broke down completely at this new disappointment.

"You see," explained Loo, heedless of the storm, running down the steps, "our little sister is lost."

"Is she a golden-haired baby about four years old?" interrupted Max excitedly.

"Yes! yes!" screamed Lee, while his mother,

white and trembling, grasped the balustrade and sank to her knees, overcome by the terrible fear that Althea was being brought home dead.

"Have you found her?" implored Loo, taking hold of Max's arm.

"Yes, indeed! She is safe at Court Ledge with my mother."

"Father! Lolly! Lona! Lolly! She's found! She's found!" and Loo, wild with relief and joy, flew into the house, leaving Lee and Max to assist his mother into the now rapidly filling hall. Max told in a few simple words of his finding Althea and of her now unconscious condition.

"God bless you, dear," whispered Mrs. Alvoyd, clasping her hands tightly as if to keep back the cries of joy and relief that rushed to her lips.

"We had better go down to Court Ledge at once, my son," Dr. Alvoyd said huskily, putting his hand on Max's shoulder, "we are needed there."

"I'm going with you, Irving. My darling may know me," said his wife, wearily getting up from the couch where Lee had tenderly laid her.

"You are to do nothing of the sort, sweetheart," answered her husband gently, pushing her back on the pillows, "you must have rest. I'll go down and bring her back as soon as possible," and he hurried to his study.

"Father," said a low voice at his elbow, and turning quickly he met Loo's dark eyes filled with plead-

ing tears, "won't you please — please take — Lolly with you? Althea loves her so much — and she'll want her right away when she wakes up — and Loll — Loll loves her best — I know she does," and Loo's remorseful suggestion ended with a sob.

"Son," answered his father, lifting the boy high in his arms, and resting his swarthy cheek against the child's rosy one, "this has been a terrible lesson for you, but knowing now the one great defect in your character you must work, endeavor, and pray to prevent this one fault from ruining your whole life; but it was not wholly your fault, dear, for often the most loving hearts suffer the most from jealousy. Never doubt but that Lollie loves you better than anyone, except perhaps Mama and me, and she has had two portions of pain to bear since yesterday — her dreadful anxiety about Althea, and her sorrowful pity for you. She has followed you about like a mournful little shadow, trying to comfort you with her love and sympathy."

"I know she did, Papa, but I thought none of you would really love me again if we didn't find Althea."

"Fathers and mothers, or even sisters or brothers do not love in such a light way; little man, you are dearer to us now than before, for now you need help as well as love to make you a good, generous man. That's a capital idea about Lucille," he con-

tinued, setting Loo on the top of his big desk, while he filled his case with bottles and vials.

"I never thought of her. She may be the very one 'sister' will want when she becomes conscious," he went on cheerfully, thankful his small son could not read the fear at his heart. "Unconscious so long, is a bad sign," he muttered, as Loo hopped down and ran off with a bright smile of peace and hope to tell Lollie she was to go with Father.

Fifteen minutes later, Dr. Alvoyd, Max, and Loll, almost smothered in rubber boots, hood, and shawl, walked quickly down to the landing, while the assembled family sent shouts and blessings after them from the veranda.

When Max ushered Dr. Alvoyd into his mother's darkened chamber, they found her with bright eyes and flushed cheeks, sitting up in bed with Althea's burning hand clasped in hers.

"Poor little woman!" said Dr. Alvoyd sorrowfully, after the greetings and explanations, when he stood looking soberly down on the child tossing and moaning in an agony of delirium.

"It is just as I feared; the great change from the North, the strange people, the grief and homesickness for her mother, coupled with the fright and exposure of last night, have brought on typhoid fever."

"Why, is the little one not your own?" exclaimed Mrs. Melody, in a voice of astonishment; for the doctor had addressed his diagnosis to her.

"No; she is an adopted daughter; the child of Mrs. Alvoyd's dearest friend, and has only been in Florida a month; but we love her dearly and must make heroic efforts to save her now," he continued, walking over to the light and examining his little thermometer more closely; "above all she must not be moved to-day."

"That is what I thought," interrupted Mrs. Melody, "so I had the room beyond prepared for her use, as long as you may need it. I know the requirements of fever," she added somewhat sadly.

In the next few hours Max made another trip to Rosemont, only this time in a carriage, and brought back Mrs. Alvoyd, and Mammy Clar, who was known for miles around as a splendid nurse. Then Althea was installed in a big, roomy crib with cold compresses on the burning little head, and cooling drinks for the poor parched throat; but she never regained consciousness, never opened her eyes, but in a hoarse, strange voice begged "Mama" and "Lolly" to come to her, or rambled of people and places unknown to the new friends, who hung over the little bed of pain with as much love and tenderness as though the only child of their hearts lay suffering there.

Day after day slipped by and the only change noticed in the little sister was the loss of all the lovely curls, which made her head look as if someone had tied on it a tiny cap of gleaming gold.

And as she called so often for "Lollie," the little girl was kept at Court Ledge, too, so that at the first return of consciousness she would be there to welcome Althea back to the world again.

CHAPTER VI.

DARK DAYS.

NEW experiences came to the young people on the two plantations in the days that followed the eventful night during which Max had found Althea in Okefinokee.

Mrs. Melody took a strange fancy to Mrs. Alvoyd, and that tender-hearted woman gave the desolate widow a rare, sweet friendship, such as occasionally blesses this selfish world, a true friendship between two women.

And many hours the happy mother of Rosemont stole from the bedside of the unconscious child, to soothe the pains and weariness of her new friend, and to her Mrs. Melody revealed the short sweet romance of her wifehood.

When Max would see them quietly talking in his mother's cosy corner, he would steal happily away; for Maudechen's face was always peaceful and smiling when their new friend was near.

Lolly, while always within calling distance, was not allowed in the sickroom. Loo and Lee were confined to the house with severe sore throats, the result of tramping about in the storm the night Althea was lost; and, while Lee nearly drove poor Loo frantic with demands for amusement, Loo's

fits of unhappiness about Althea, and lonesomeness for Loll, were even harder to bear.

"O dear, I don't see why Lolly has to stay over there now," he moaned one stormy afternoon, as they sat near the grate, in the nursery, playing games. "Father said the crisis wouldn't be till Saturday, and Althea won't be conscious till then! Why don't she come home and stay," he demanded impatiently.

"If Althea were to die, dear," replied Lona quietly, putting down a pick she had been trying to hook under a rake of a jack-straw, and walking towards the window, "Father wants Loll to be with her, for she would be conscious then. Mama told me last night Althea had called Loll again and again; but when they took her in she didn't notice her at all and kept right on calling, even when Loll spoke to her. O boys," she cried, coming back to the table with the tears streaming down her face, "Papa doesn't think Althea will ever get well!"

"O don't, please don't," begged Loo, as if he were warding off a cruel blow.

But Lee looked at his twin calmly for a moment, then said gravely, "Lona, who told you?"

"Mama did, last night. She came in to sleep with me after Father had gone over to Court Ledge, and I heard her crying and guessed the truth right away. Why? Because I've known it all along, but ——"

Here he was interrupted by Loo crying wildly, "How hateful you're all treating me! How hateful! I know it's my fault she got lost, but I'll cross my heart if I wouldn't rather be dead than to have you all act so. And I won't stand it—I'll cut and run away!" And springing up he tried to rush from the room, but Lona caught his arm and held on desperately, while she sobbed out the truth.

"Loo, Loo, Mama made me promise not to tell you, because she said you felt too terrible about it already, and it would be time enough if anything did happen. She said she would not let you be made unhappy again 'till she had to. Mama's sick now with all the worry, and if you were to do such a terrible thing you'd kill her and we'd never, never forgive that."

"Look here, Loo, haven't we got trouble enough now, without you flying off and doing something crazy! We haven't been having secrets from you. Father told me, but I didn't know even Mama knew the truth."

"Well, what is the truth?" asked Loo wildly. "Tell me all of it now, or I'll go over to Court Ledge and ask Father myself."

"I would if I were you, and get a rattling good scolding for your pains, when he told us not to even leave this room," replied Lee calmly. "All I know is that Althea was not strong to begin with, and the fever is so terrible, Father says, it's just

eating up her life,— he — he doesn't think she can hold out 'till the twenty-one days are over. They've cut off all her curls," he added sorrowfully.

Loo turned deadly pale, and sat down suddenly as though the "truth" was harder to bear than he had thought; but Lona sobbed her heart out, moaning, "Oh, Lee, those lovely, lovely curls!"

"Aren't you glad we found the picture down in the wreck? It's just like she was," said Lee, after a pause.

"I don't think I'll ever be glad about anything again," replied Loo dismally.

That evening after her father and mother had bidden her good night, Loll stood at the window in the hall and peered after them until Max came down.

"Lollie, if you'd like, I'll take you up to my den, and show you the curios I was telling you about," he said cheerily, for he saw his little guest was homesick.

"All right. I'd like to see them —only I wish Loo was here, too," she answered with a little quiver in her voice, "I guess he's lonely at home alone."

"Alone! Why, aren't your sister and brother there?" asked Max in surprise, not exactly flattered by her reply.

"Of course, Lee and Lona are home; but I'm his twin and that makes a difference."

"Oh!" said Max, simply, wondering if twins didn't love the other members of their families; but too polite to ask, and silently led the way to his "den" at the end of the old house.

"You'd better wait here by the door, while I find the lamp," he said laughing.

"My gracious!" exclaimed Loll, when a soft glow of light flooded the room; for the den was low and wide, with a large bay window overlooking the garden, and an old-fashioned brick grate down in one corner, which gave it a cozy appearance. Over the mantel was an American eagle, with wings poised for a flight he was never to take, while two solemn arctic owls stood keeping guard over a nest of downy yellow chicks; the walls were covered with class streamers and endless photographs of famous buildings, and bits of lovely scenery of Europe; while books and small glass cases filled every shelf and table, and to cap all a complete suit of bronze armor stood grimly in one corner.

"Let's begin down here by the grate and go right around," proposed Max, leading the way to a miniature forest of one immense cedar branch covered with gayly plumed birds.

"How beautiful!" cried Loll, entranced by the sight of the bright-colored little fellows.

"It was father's. He shot and mounted every single one. Do you know the legend of this bird?" he asked, pointing to a crimson-breasted rover.

"Yes; it's the 'cross-bill.' Mama has read Longfellow's poem to us lots of times. His breast does look as if drops of blood had fallen upon it, doesn't it?"

"I think so, and wish they wouldn't allow anybody to kill one. Father was very sorry when he found what he had done; but he brought it home for me and we learned the poem."

"How did he ever get so many pretty ones?" asked Loll in wonder, for the children of Florida have no acquaintance with the bright-coated warblers of the North.

"Father was very fond of hunting, and often took mother and me with him, and he always kept some of the game to mount. He taught me how to prepare them, too. I'll show you sometime if you like."

"O, I'd love to know how — only I'll have to stuff chickens; they're the only birds I ever get near enough to catch. Will you show Loo, too?" she added thoughtfully.

"Why, yes, anybody you'd like," answered Max politely, wondering if twins thought of no one but themselves, for that Loo seemed to pop up at every turn.

"What a pretty piece of bone!" cried Loll, bending over a case lined with black velvet. "Why, it's got a flower pressed on it," she continued in surprise, as Max lighted another small lamp near her, so they might see the treasure more clearly.

"That's a shell," he laughed, then, fearing he had offended his companion, added hastily, "it really does look like a bone."

Loll was quick to understand his kindness, so she laughed too, and said gayly, "I thought I'd never heard of an animal with pictures on its bones."

"It's really a shell I found on the beach at Naples, when I was a little chap. I had almost stepped on it, for you see it's just the color of sea-sand; but the little flower caught my eye, too, so I carried it to Maudechen and it proved quite wonderful. They are called 'key-hole urchins'; see the five little key holes? It used to be a fish, but they are all extinct in the North Atlantic now; that's why father kept it for me."

"I should think he would; it's just beautiful and delicate."

"Lolly, here is something we collected just before my father's death — and I like it best of all, because we had such good times while we were getting 'em," and Max lifted from a shelf a small, neatly bound glass case.

"Why, they look like bits of dirt to me," said Loll, doubtfully surveying the little pieces of labeled earth, tucked carefully away under the lid.

"That's just what they are; but each piece is from some famous battle-field in Europe. That largest one is from Waterloo, and this little reddish one is from Crecy. Father told me the story of

every one of the battles, as we visited the fields to get these, and it was a big help when I came to study history. When you — and Loo," he added quickly, for he had mentally resolved to bring that young gentleman in on all points, "study foreign history they'll be interesting."

"I should think so; but I'd like to make a collection like this from famous battle-fields of America," replied Loll loyally. "They're lots over here, and then all the little pieces would be free earth."

"Well, I guess! America's the greatest country in the world. I'm an American, even if I was born in Italy. My parents were both born here in the United States."

"I'm awfully glad of that," said Loll heartily; "I wouldn't like you to be an Italian."

"Why?"

"Because in Jacksonville they all sell bananas or play a hand-organ!"

Max laughed merrily at her earnestness.

"Oh, some of the Italians in Italy are very grand people, they will hardly look at anybody unless they are a lord or Count Somebody." he explained kindly.

"Then I guess I never saw any of that kind," admitted Loll.

"No; the noble families of Italy seldom travel," Max said seriously, for though "an American," he loved the sunny land of his birth.

"What a pretty picture of Westminster Abbey!"

she exclaimed, stopping before a daintily framed watercolor of the historic old pile. "Is it a church, Max?" asked Loll, for while she knew the name of the building, from an etching on their own library wall, she knew nothing of its history.

"Yes," replied Max, "it's one big church, with lots and lots of chapels in and around it. Most all the kings and queens of England and Scotland and their little children are buried there. Here's a piece of white marble from the great Edward the Confessor's chapel; it is right from the tomb of two baby princesses, Margaret and Elizabeth."

"How did you happen to get it?" asked Loll in surprise, for she thought Max above vandalism, which was something the twins looked upon with horror since a full account of the recent disfigurement of Washington's tomb had been read to them, and the disloyalty and actual wickedness carefully pointed out. Max seemed to understand the meaning of her question, for he answered frankly. "I was watching some laborers repairing a little place near this tomb, and when one chipped this off accidentally I asked him 'for it. You see I lived very near the 'Abbey' for a whole year, and often used to spend rainy days there, wandering about. It is so big, and old, and grand!'"

"I'd love to cross the ocean and see all those grand places — only I want to see all of America first," said the intensely American young lady.

"Oh, I want to see the Rocky Mountains ever so much. Maudechen says they are grander than even the Alps, and they're pretty nearly perfect," replied her European born "fellow countryman."

"We are all going to California when Loo and I are fifteen — Papa has promised to take us. You'll have to come too — wouldn't we have fun climbing mountains, and riding horseback through whole valleys."

"Yes, and live in a tent and just 'rough it.'" As they stopped by the press on the grate Max said, "Here are the flowers I was gathering the day I found Althea; haven't the colors come out beautifully?"

"Why, they're as bright as when they were fresh! Oh, I forgot! You don't know what we found down in the swamp that same day." And Loll told of their visit to Lee's wreck, and the way they had discovered the picture of "Molly" who had looked so much like Althea that when they feared she never would be found they were thankful that, at least, they had a picture of her.

Up in the quaint "den" Lolly and Max became great friends. To the solitary boy, familiar only with decorous little maidens, accompanied by bonnes or governesses in the French parks or English gardens, this lovely, yet simple child was a revelation.

"You're not a bit like the little girls I knew at home," he said, when they were seated on the old lounge in front of the grate.

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"Why?" asked Loo anxiously.

"Oh, they're all so quiet and prim. The girls have governesses and the boys tutors. They don't chum with their brothers the way you do. Girls over there read, practise music, and ride horseback an awful lot, and the boys study and play."

"Mama reads to us, and Father can tell the grandest stories; but I'd hate to have Loo and Lee study away from Lona and me; they might get ahead of us and that would spoil all the fun. That'd be horrid," she added, in deep disgust.

"You don't read the same books? The boys don't like girl stories, do they?" asked Max, wondering if the wonderful "boys" were going to prove "muffs."

"O no! Even Lona and I don't like many stories for girls — they're always so preachy and good. We like 'Juan and Juanita,' and 'Toby Tyler'; that's grand! All about a circus. Oh, don't I wish I could be in one!" cried Loll excitedly. "We tried to do everything poor Toby had to do — and Lona can stand up on Bob's back while he walks around ever so fast, and once when Mama and Father were away she jumped through a hoop of a barrel! But she got so scared she slid right off Bob and laid down on the ground and poor Lee fell on top of her — because he had held the ring, and thought she was killed."

Max laughed till the tears streamed down his

face, but gasped, "Did she really land on the horse's back?"

"Yes, of course she did — only she didn't know it until afterwards, and she never would do it again, even when Lee begged and begged her to; but we can do lots of other things. Lee is always the clown and turns somersaults off a spring board; and Loo walks a tight rope, and walks on his hands for a terribly long time."

"What can you do?" asked Max, expecting to hear she turned somersaults off the top of a barn.

"I act on the trapeze with Loo."

"You do!"

"Yes; we have two trapezes over the hay, and Loo hangs by his knees and holds my hands, then when we swing right high, he let's go and I try to catch the other one. It's loads of fun! I tried to jump off the rafters to him once, but I was so heavy we both tumbled head first into the hay. Lona can jump even further than Lee! With a little run, she can go from off the oats-box to the hay shoot."

"You and your sister go everywhere and do everything your brothers do, don't you?" asked Max looking admiringly at the little girl, but laughing at the tales of the wild pranks that seemed almost impossibilities to him.

"Why, yes; we're a funny lot. First, we're all twins — so that makes me have one sister and two brothers, and Loo has two sisters and only one

brother — that's why we keep together — so we won't get mixed up." And Loll joined in Max's hearty laugh at her queer explanation of the family complications. "But now, of course, we've all got a 'little sister.' "

"Dear little Althea," Max said softly, wondering if Loll knew how near they were to losing the "little sister." But her next answer proved she did not.

"When Althea gets well you'll have to come over and see us act," she said, getting up with a sigh; for the little cuckoo in the corner was announcing nine, and she was under promise to report to Mammy at that highly unpopular hour.

"Good night," she said, holding out her hand; "I have to go now; but let's come back to-morrow evening. I like it in here."

"We'll come whenever you like," Max answered, pulling her back onto the sofa beside him, saying wistfully, "I wish I had a sister like you, Lollie. Your brothers ought to be the happiest fellows in the world."

"Poor Max," said Loll sweetly, slipping her little hand in his. "It's a shame you're so lonely, and I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll just love you and make Loo and Lona and Lee love you too and we'll all be dear friends."

"Thank you," said Max gaily; "I'll never let you forget your promise. Good night, dear friend."

"Good night!" And Lollie ran off to kiss Mrs.

Melody and be tucked in the little bed beside her ; while Max sat on the old lounge and wondered why his beloved Father had been taken when he was all they had, and the boys over the way had everything — father, mother, and little sisters.

* * * *

Words cannot describe the sorrow and gloom that hung over the two plantations on the twenty-first day of Althea's illness. The child had, up to this time, feebly held her own ; but at dawn of that critical day she lay like a broken white flower that a rough, cruel storm had left prostrate.

Doctor and Mrs. Alvoyd did not leave her bedside ; Max, Lee and Loll roamed aimlessly, with hushed voices and solemn faces, through the silent house. Everything was so quiet and still it seemed as though the whole world was holding its breath to learn if Althea would ever brighten its gay gardens again with her sunny hair and silvery laugh ; or be softly folded away in its old gray breast.

"Lee," asked Loll, when their wanderings had at last brought them to the front steps, "was Loo really able to be up this morning ?" for Loo's sore throat had developed into tonsilitis and confined him to the nursery long after Lee had been able to make many visits to Court Ledge.

"Yes, Loll, he was up all right, but had a terrible'

headache; so Lona promised Mama to stay with him."

"Oh, I'm so glad she did. It would be terrible over there alone to-day. I asked Father to let me go, but he said I must be here; they may need me any minute."

"Well, I'll go home and cheer them up. But say, how are you going to manage about to-night? Father said the crisis will not be until around twelve."

"Yes, I know, so I'm going to sleep very early; then about eleven o'clock Mama's going to take me in and I'll stay until Althea wakes up," replied Loll gravely.

"I wish there was some way we could find out—how she is after midnight, but Father has forbidden our leaving the house until morning."

"I can fix it," exclaimed Max. "I've got two lanterns and if everything's all right I'll hang one up in the north cupola — and if — anything should happen I'll put both of them."

"Good enough!" cried Lee, thinking the plan strangely romantic. "Don't say anything about it and we'll go up in our cupola to-night and watch — and pray," he added earnestly, "that only *one* light may shine from the old north tower. I said I'd be back as soon as I could; so I guess I'll skip. Come on and walk down to the boat, Max."

"O Lee, wait just a second," and Loll ran into

the house and returned in a moment with a crumpled envelope in her hand; "give this to Loo; it's a letter I wrote him last night."

"All right, good-bye."

"Good-bye. I'll see you in the morning," and putting her arms around his neck Loll kissed him softly. Lee looked at her in surprise and would have resented such a display of affection before Max, if the thought of what might be their meeting "to-morrow" had not made his heart very tender.

"How is she," cried Loo, starting up, as Lee came into the nursery an hour later.

"There's no change yet. Father says she'll stay just as she has been until to-night."

"Then what?" demanded Loo, with a startled face.

"Then she'll either go off to sleep — or just die," answered Lee in a desperate voice.

"Oh, Lee, don't!" begged Lona, who had come into the room with a cup of chocolate for Loo, as he had finished speaking.

"I can't help it, Lona; he gets mad if we have secrets and you don't want me to tell the truth — now what's a fellow going to do?" he asked impatiently, throwing himself down on the sofa.

"I guess we'll never have any more secrets," croaked Loo from the bay window, where he had gone to read Loll's loving, hopeful note.

"Well, we just will, then, for I've got one to tell

both of you this minute," answered his brother as, hopping up and pulling Lona into the corner where Loo was, he whispered the plan about the lights.

"But don't say a word about it, for Delphy won't let you go up to the attic at that time of night with your cold, Loo. I'll wake you up about eleven o'clock and we'll just skip up as quiet as mice. Lona, see if you can't smuggle a blanket up there some time to-day, so he can wrap up; because we may have to stay there a couple of hours."

The mysterious planning for the evening helped to break the dreariness of the long day at Rosemont. Over at Court Ledge, Max read aloud to Loll until they were called in to a hasty lunch of cake, milk, and fruit.

"Come up to the den and help me fix the lanterns," he whispered as they left the dining-room. "I've two beauties. The kind travelers use in Switzerland when going over the mountains at night."

"O goody! But I wish it was to-night," sighed Loll.

"I don't."

"Why not?" she demanded in surprise.

"Because, what's the use of wishing! Just remember that when you want something you simply can't have, and it will often make you contented," answered Max, with a wise little nod.

"You think such funny things, Max," Loll said,

looking up at him with a half admiring, half amused look.

"I have to think them or I couldn't keep Maudchen cheerful," he replied simply.

"Max, would you be offended if I asked you something?" Loll said timidly, as they sat on the floor by the grate, polishing, cleaning, and trimming the big, clumsy lamps.

"Why, of course not; what is it!"

"Why do you call your Mama that funny name, instead of Mother or Mama, or something like that?"

Max flushed, but answered frankly.

"It's the name my father always called her, and when I was a baby I often used to say it out of naughtiness — because they always laughed at the comical way I'd say it — until whenever I wanted anything I couldn't have I'd run behind a chair and cry, 'Baudchen div me dat.' Of course she would give it to me then, so that's the way I got into the way of calling Mother by that name. You see, father was very strong and tall, and my mother was so little, that he added the German pet name of 'chen', meaning dear and little, and called her 'Maudechen.' Oh, Lollie, he was the best, the noblest father that ever lived!" And Max did not turn away to hide the trembling of his lips; he was proud to have had a father so good and true.

"I'm so sorry I asked you!" said Loll mournfully.

"I'm glad you did. I never thought how strange it might sound to others; for men must not carry their home secrets into the world," he answered with boyish dignity. "Will——"

"Lollie," interrupted Mrs. Alvoyd at the door, "I wish you to come and take your nap, dear, it's nearly six and we want a clear head and plenty of strength in our daughter to-night."

"Yes, Mama."

"You had better take a little rest, Max, you will be up a great deal too and your mother may need you," she said, drawing her hand lovingly over the boy's curly head.

"Your suggestion shall be obeyed — Mrs. Doctor," laughingly returned Max, for he insisted she was the best physician his mother had ever had. "Mrs. Doctor Good-Spirits," he called her.

It was nearly eleven when Dr. Alvoyd awakened Loll and helped her slip into a warm wrapper and slippers before he carried her into the dim, quiet room where Althea lay faintly moaning.

"Stay with Mama, daughter," he whispered, putting her on her mother's lap, "but if I call — come quickly."

"Mama, me's 'faid in de dark," moaned the child on the bed. "Me's 'faid. Lollie! Lollie!" she screamed, starting up suddenly — then lay back very still.

"Don't, dear, don't," said Mrs. Alvoyd, gently,

as Loll in answer to that frightened cry sprang up.
“She is not conscious, pet; she does not even see you.”

After that strangely strong call, Althea stopped moaning and only the softest, faintest breathing told that the little life still flickered.

For ages, it seemed to Loll, she watched her father bend over the bed and then walk to the lamp on the table and look at his watch. But just when she was falling off into a doze she heard him say quickly, “Tude, bring her here!” and before she knew what was happening she was sitting on the edge of the bed and looking down at a — strange little girl!

“Is this Althea?” she asked in a shocked whisper; but her father put his finger to his lips to warn her to keep silence, so she just sat there looking and looking and trying to recognize something of the “Christmas fairy” in this white shadow-child.

Suddenly the great blue eyes opened and with a wan little smile, Althea greeted the sweet face bending over her.

“Lollie, I’s so tired,” she whispered faintly.

“So am I, dear love,” answered Loll, the tears running down her face and her whole body trembling with sobs, “let’s you and me just cuddle down, all comfy, and take a daisy sleep,” and nestling the shorn golden head close to her dusky curls, the weary little sisters — one worn out with excitement

and anxiety, the other with fever and pain — fell fast asleep.

"Thank God. All is well!" whispered Doctor Alvoyd a half hour later when Max crept in to receive a confirmation of the joyful news Mrs. Alvoyd had carried to his mother. Stopping to bestow a bear-like hug upon the tall doctor, he flew to the den and catching up the largest lantern rushed to the old cupola and hung it aloft in the upper pane of the big north window.

"It's fine and clear. They surely will see it," he almost sobbed; and kneeling there, with his arms on the sill, tried to imagine what was going on in the attic of Rosemont.

Had he possessed the Seven League eyes, he would have seen, seated on a low, flat trunk, three children — sound asleep! Lee in the corner, Lona leaning against him with Loo's head, at the end of a long roll of gray blanket, pillow'd in her lap.

In his anxiety to have them there on time, Lee had awakened them an hour too early, and, unused to midnight promenades, they had talked in whispers for "hours" (it seemed to them); then just when they decided it must be almost morning — and that Max had forgotten them — quietly fell asleep. How long they would have stayed so, hadn't Loo rolled off the trunk, it's hard to tell; but he did, and the very first thing he saw when he sat up stiff and bewildered was Max's cheery little beacon

announcing life for Althea,— and happiness again for Rosemont.

"Lona! Lee!" he screamed, forgetting in his joy the charge "to be quiet." "There's the light — and — only — one!"

"What! what!" cried Lee, so startled and sleepy that he didn't remember ever having heard of a light.

"Oh, Lee," sobbed Lona, proving her woman's nature by being clear-headed, and wide awake in a moment, "see! There's only one light."

They crowded to the window and looked and looked, until Loo whispered pathetically, as he held on to his sister,

"How can I ever, ever thank God enough for not letting her die!"

"By loving your neighbor as yourself, dear," Lona answered solemnly.

And I think she was right.

CHAPTER VII.

BRIGHT DAYS.

LIKE a fair rainbow arching a misty sky, acts of love and devotion wove a strong, sweet bond between the "dear friends" of Rosemont and Court Ledge, in the peaceful weeks which followed the crisis of Althea's illness.

Lolly had no trouble in keeping her promise to make "her brothers and sister love Max," for the boy had such a lovable character that no one could withstand being friends with him, and they liked him for himself — and not for his loneliness.

Loo took his long separation from Loll and her great friendship for the young master of Court Ledge as a punishment for his unkindness to Althea; and a season of quiet, moody silence followed one passionate outburst. But when their life fell back into the old ways of study and play, Max began to fill a greater place in it than even Althea had done. He was so merry and lively, though over all was that touch of boyish superiority that made him fairly adored by the brothers, and a truly beloved champion of the girls.

After the first two weeks of Althea's convalescence had passed, the "friends" (as they called

themselves) were seldom apart. Max was at Rosemont or the quartette were at Court Ledge. Even their classes were frequently combined, and poor Professor Morgan was driven nearly distracted by arriving at the "Ledge" and finding his pupil with every lesson perfectly learned, awaiting him over at Rosemont, or vice versa.

While the little invalid was slowly coming back from the dim world of dreams to the bright one of reality, the children thought of nothing but pleasing and amusing her. Althea never remembered that her wild trip into Okefinokee was a reality; but always spoke of it as "a naughty dweam." That she had boarded a loosely moored fruit lighter, and floated down one of the many by-ways of the creek, out of sight and hearing of the main channel, were matters of mere speculation — they never knew the truth. But the greatest mystery of all was the presence in the boat with her of the strange dog. No one had ever seen him before; but didn't he become the best beloved, most-tenderly-cared-for pet in Florida! Honors were showered upon him, which he took with a great deal of doggish dignity, as though respect had always been his portion. And it had; for to this day "Bird's" loss is deeply mourned by a young Northern gentleman who in January of 18— took a solitary hunting trip through the swamps of Florida.

How Bird had failed to return to camp one night,

and became a member of the crew of the fruit lighter, is another matter for speculation. But if Bird could have talked he might have told heart-rending stories of the "stick-to-it-tiveness" of Florida bogs; of the only solid footing in sight, a flat, narrow boat with but one passenger; and possibly pitiful cries of, "O doggie, don't do 'way, 'cause I's 'faid in de dark!" Of how his doggish heart had been torn between love for his master and compassion for a little girl all alone in a big, dark place; and how after moments of serious consideration he had decided in favor of the baby.

"He is really a magnificent setter," Doctor Alvoyd said, as the twins assembled in the garden one morning to decide the all-important question of his name; "but I think we ought to call him 'Tramp,'" he added jestingly.

"O father, such a perfectly horrid name for such a splendid dog!" cried Lona, indignantly.

"Well, isn't he a tramp?" teased her father.

"No, he isn't. He's a — he's a — castaway!" she answered triumphantly.

"Then call him 'Casty' or 'Castor,' but don't call him 'Away,' because he'll never know if you mean him to come or go."

"O, Papa," laughed the children, "you're just funning. Now truly we want a fine name for him, because he really found Althea. Max never would have seen her if he hadn't barked."

"Well, I don't know about that, Chicks ; I rather think Althea found him ; he would be swimming around in that swamp yet if she hadn't come along and picked him up," said Dr. Alvoyd laughingly.

"O dear, Dad, you're corralable," sighed Loll, getting up with a sad shake of her head.

"Young lady, don't you know it isn't polite to call your father a donkey?"

"Why, Papa!" began Loll with a reproachful look, going over and standing beside him ; "I didn't say that."

"Well, lady sweet, the only things 'corralable' down in this country are donkeys. I suppose you meant incorrigible," he laughed tossing her up on his shoulder and marching off to meet his wife as she came through the garden.

"Come here, Tude, these gipsies want a 'perfectly splendid' name for their perfectly magnificent hero, Althea's dog. I suggested 'Tramp,' but they seem to consider such levity sacrilegious. Now they could call him 'Cæsar' if they knew whether he seized her or she him," he went on in mock enthusiasm.

"Mama, please make him behave," begged Loll mischievously.

"Mama, make her behave," retorted her father promptly ; "she called me a donkey!"

"Did she call you a Jacky, dear, in just those words?" asked his wife, in a tone of great sympathy.

"I might have known I'd never get justice against one of the girls," he returned indignantly, but with a merry laugh he tossed Loll off his shoulder and sent her feet first plump into a large honey-suckle hedge. "Come on, boys, we must join forces and get our way about the name before one of the enemy finds herself," he laughed, as Loll floundered around with only her merry face visible over the sweet blossoms; "if you really want it on the collar for that precious beast."

"Can't you think of a nice name, Mama?" asked Lee, while Lona went to Loll's assistance and pulled her out of the flowery nest by the feet—which process left her whole in body and that's about all.

Mrs. Alvoyd shook her finger at them, for no sooner was Loll released than they began whispering and laughing over some revenge to be taken on their father.

"Don't you think 'Guardy' would be appropriate? He really was a guardian to Althea on their mysterious trip," she returned; gladly taking up the cudgels in doggie's defense, for she felt she owed him the debt of having her heart and home free from a terrible sorrow.

"Guardy! O that's fine!" cried the boys in a chorus; the girls bringing up the rear with a happy laugh, for they had captured their father with two long vines of honey-suckle and were tying the ends to the back of his chair.

"Guardy you are, old fellow, now and forever — that's as long as you remain on land. Hope you like it!" cried Dr. Alvoyd merrily, breaking his frail chains and shaking the paw of the dignified dog as if he were a boy of ten.

"Papa, will you please order his collar to-day, with the name in big letters, so we can take it over to show Althea and Max to-morrow?" asked Loo.

"Certainly. Will plain diamonds do for the lettering or would something a bit more expensive suit better?" he asked with a whimsical glance at Lona.

"Well, now that you mention it I would prefer Lapis Lazuli," answered Lee, with a conscious flush at his parent's surprised look at his knowledge of lapidary.

"Hello, youngster, where did you pick that up? I rather imagined diamonds were the limit of your idea of valuables."

"I read a few lines in a poem once and it said something about lapis lazuli and I didn't know what it meant, so I looked in your dictionary and it said lapis lazuli was a very blue stone, rare and more valuable than diamonds. But I only said it just for fun, now."

"I'm glad you're that curious, Lee," said his mother fondly. "Keep to the practice of looking up words and sentences you have never met before or do not understand, and by the time you are

twenty-one you will be a very well-informed man."

"I like to find out things for myself," answered Lee, simply; for he never did put on airs over being the eldest and, consequently, knowing a bit more than the rest.

"Oh, but that's so much trouble," objected Lona, "when I am interrest-ed in a story I could read my own grandmother's name and never stop to see if she was Mama's or Papa's mother."

They all laughed; but her mother shook her head at her impatient daughter, and was about to explain away such methods, when a loud trill announced Max, and the twins raced off to meet him.

"How different those four are in character," said Dr. Alvoyd to his wife when they were left alone. "Lee so calm and painstaking, and Lona so impatient and harum-scarum."

"Each seems to set off the other; they are alike only in affection; and somehow I do not fear for the future of Lee and Lona as I do for that of Loo and Loll. He is so passionate and fiery—and she so gentle and shrinking. I grow afraid when I think how hard the world is to a man of Loo's temperament and a woman of Lollie's."

"You must not think of it then, dear."

"I don't, often; for I know all will be well as long as we have you to take care of us," she said, putting her head on his shoulder to hide the tears

that often came at the thought of her bright, beautiful boy's proud nature.

"We can only do our best, Tude, and leave all else in hands stronger and even more loving than ours," answered her husband.

"We'll watch, pray, entreat, and tire not at sea,
And the tender grace of our child's budding soul
We'll lead gently back to Thee."

repeated Mrs. Alvoyd in her low, sweet voice.

"Irving," she said suddenly, after a long pause in which both had been thinking of their little flock, "I want to tell you something."

"I'm longing to be told," answered Dr. Alvoyd, smiling at her serious face.

"Do you know I think you can help Mrs. Melody?"

"Do you remember Mrs. Melody has been under the care of the most famous surgeons in Europe? They have given her no hope; yet you, my enthusiastic little wife, think a Florida homeopath can make her well by looking at her," he said, still smiling.

"Well, you may not be a surgeon of Leipsic, but you're the best physician in Florida. Aren't you worried almost to death with offers from Northern colleges," answered his wife stoutly; for her husband's renown was very dear to her.

"Certainly; but I prefer my practice among the orange groves and roses of Florida to a college

auditorium packed with boys. But, in fact, I have been studying Mrs. Melody's case since the first time I saw her. Max has given me a great many particulars, and I have my diagnosis mapped out."

"Do you think anything can be done?" asked his wife, almost fearfully.

"Yes, I certainly do think something can be done. I have consulted Dr. Pounds, and he agrees that an operation similar to the one we performed upon Marie's child is what she requires. With all their prestige the Heidelberg physicians aimed too high — a simple operation, a simple bandage, will, we think and hope, permit her to walk."

"Oh, Irving, have you gone that far into it?" exclaimed his wife tremulously. "How happy, how happy that dear boy will be."

"Fond minds run in the same channel, and I was going to tell you about it to-night, as I intend to speak to Mrs. Melody when I make my visit to Althea in the morning. Will you come with me?"

"Of course! Poor little woman. And to think," she said archly, "my Florida homeopath will accomplish what the surgeons in Heidelberg did not."

"Not so fast; I have only said 'we think and hope'; time alone will tell. By the way — when are we going to bring our 'sailor' home?"

Before Mrs. Alvoyd had time to answer, the children came running toward them, with Max.

"O Mama, Max says Althea felt so well this

morning that she sat up in his mother's room for a long time, playing with Lollie's doll," cried Lona, excitedly.

"Yes, Father told me when he came back this morning, and we were just wondering when it would be safe to bring her home."

"Oh, Dr. Alvoyd, please don't talk of taking her away," pleaded Max, his eyes filled with pain; "it would be terrible without her now. Mother has been so happy since Althea comes into her room to rest and play."

"Well, here's a prospect! How am I to settle this question: Althea wants Lolly at Court Ledge, Loo wants Loll at Rosemont, now here you come along and want Althea to stay at Court Ledge. I wonder what Solomon would have done under these circumstances. His was an easy proposition — he had only two contestants over the one baby — I have six. Now instead of dividing Althea, I think I'll decree that we combine, and bring your outfit over here or we'll all move over to Court Ledge. How'll that suit you?"

"Fine!" cried Lee.

"Which way," laughed his father, "come or go?"

"Come, of course. Bring 'em all to Rosemont."

"Oh, but you have so much already and we so little," Max answered bitterly.

Dr. Alvoyd looked at him gravely and then said kindly, "Let me see. Easter is two weeks off.

We'll leave Althea at Court Ledge until then; and by that time conditions may be such that you gipsies may not be parted at all. I have something very interesting for just your ears alone, Max. Come, walk down to the gate and I'll whisper it to you," he said smiling, as Max rose to follow him.

"You will pardon us," added Dr. Alvoyd, turning with old-fashioned Southern courtesy to his wife and daughters.

"Certainly," answered Mrs. Alvoyd; "I know the secret, dear, and you will like it," she whispered as she passed Max on her way to the house.

An hour slipped by before Max rejoined the twins in the barn, where they had shouted they were going. From the loft windows they watched him run down the road, and his happy face and smiling eyes quieted their fears that their father had had to tell him some unhappy news. They saw him stop Joe and heard him ask where they were.

"Dey's up to somefing in de barn, Mars' Max, I don' know what — nobody eber does — till dey goes and sees wif der own eyes."

"Let's play a joke on him," said Loo, and away they flew, laughing and tumbling over each other as Max came into the carriage room below.

"Hello, up there!" he called. Immediate silence. Max backed down a step, saying in rather a hurt voice,

"Isn't there room for me?"

From over his head came a suppressed squeak, followed by a flying white figure, and Loll flew by as though shot from a cannon. Max stood still and held his breath, expecting to hear a fall and a cry — but all was still, and before he had time to wonder at the strange performance, Lona and the boys flew over his head, in such rapid succession that the silence was broken by screams of laughter, and, running up, Max beheld them all in a heap upon the hay.

"What do you think of that?" demanded Loll, sitting up and picking off straws like an animated tooth-pick holder.

"I don't know exactly what you did," answered Max, looking up at the roof as though expecting to see a hole in it. The children understood the glance and rolled over and over, shouting with laughter; but Lona extricated herself, and running back climbed to the top of an immense box and with a run and a jump cleared the opening made by the stairs and landed off in the hay. The children simply screamed at Max's look of absolute astonishment — he could do it, oh my, yes, and much further than that too; but Lona was a girl — that was the part he couldn't understand.

"Mr. Melody, this is merely an introduction to the world's famous Quartette of Gipsy Performers, M^{es}. Annet and Angela, and Signors Lucian and

Marco," cried Lee, with a flourish of a long whip he had picked up. "The young ladies, you will notice, are very light—in the air, and the gentlemen remarkable—"

"Cranks," sang Loll, making Max's blood run cold, by skipping lightly from one rafter to another.

"Oh, now be good, and let's tell Max what we were talking about before he came," said Lona.

"All right; come and sit down then and we'll hold a manager's meeting."

They formed a circle in the sweet-scented hay and after many ahems and flourishes, Lee began.

"Max, we thought it would be jolly fun to have a circus on Easter Monday, in honor of Althea's return."

"Where could you have it; she won't be well enough to get away up here?" Max asked doubtfully.

"Why, down in the south grove—that bare place in the middle would be a grand ring. We can use Bob, he's so old we can't hurt him, and we can do loads of things and write programs and make Joe and Ned play the music," cried Lona, jumbling everything together in one breath.

"Lona, you and I will ask Mama to make us dresses like Ella wore in the picture of 'Toby Tyler,' all those thin skirts and sashes and everything."

"Max, what can you do?" asked Loo.

"Turning and jumping such as we were taught in Germany."

"Oh, good, and we'll practise like fury and make everybody open their eyes at what we can do," was Lona's enthusiastic windup.

"Well, I'll go in for anything, if you girls promise to be kind of careful and not take too many risks," said Max wisely.

"Oh, we are never careful, and are alive and whole yet," laughed Loll, with a sweep of her strong little arms.

"Are you going to tell your father?" asked Max.

"We have to. Ever since the 'wreck' business father has forbidden our having secrets when it meant we had to do something," answered Lee.

"Well, we'll say we are going to have a circus for Althea, but won't tell a single thing we are going to have!" exclaimed Loo, decidedly; "we want that part to be a big surprise."

"I wish your Mama could see it," said Loll, looking wistfully off towards Court Ledge.

"She w——" began Max, but stopped in time to prevent his secret from escaping. "Come on, I must be going, but I'll be over after lunch, and then for the first rehearsal."

When the twins told their plans that evening at the tea table, they received permission to carry out their lark, after making a great many promises to be careful and to do nothing rash.

"Mama, will you truly make us dresses like Ella wore?" cried the girls, skipping happily about.

"Yes, I'll help you every way I can, for I think it will please Althea very much, and I'm glad you thought of it," replied their mother, as she kissed them good-night.

"Now, boys," said Lona, coming up into the hay-loft the next afternoon with a big sheet of paper in her hand, "Loll and I have made out a program, so we can practise things one right after another, and not get mixed up."

"Read it off and what we don't want we'll cut out," said Lee.

"You'll take what we have or nothing at all!" cried Lona, her eyes kindling at his air of superiority.

Lee looked at her for a moment, but knowing from experience that patient, easy-going Lona was a little fury when roused, said calmly, "Lona, if you're going to act like that at the beginning, we might just as well give up the whole business."

"Well, I'm not going to work over a thing for a steady hour, and then have you take and cut it all up to suit yourself!" she answered angrily, throwing the neat sheet on the dusty floor.

"I thought we were all going to have a part in it — and give ideas, and make changes, and have fun out of everything," replied Lee, lying back in the hay and staring wrathfully at the roof.

"That's what we want, too," said Loll, coming to heal the breach, in her gentle way. "We thought of everything we could, and wrote it down; so you three listen and see if you like it or could add something," she continued, picking up the program and offering it to Lona.

"I won't," answered that young lady so shortly that Lee looked over at her angrily. But the sight of two big tears on his twin's lashes softened his heart, and he said good-naturedly, "Oh, go on, Lona, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, honest I didn't."

Lona caught up the paper and began to read in rather a sullen voice, "First, Joe, Ned and Jasper must play music for us."

"Yes."

"Then, the first number ought to be a parade. Guardy, all trimmed up with flowers, to head it, because he's the hero of the whole shebang; then, Max on Spitfire, carrying some flags—'

"Make 'em American," said the boy, with a smile at Loll, who answered it with an approving nod.

"All right," agreed everybody.

"Then, myself on Bob," continued Lona; "next, you, Lee, dressed up like a clown, on Thistle,—clowns always ride on donkeys," she added, smiling, for the "hurt" was all gone now, and her tempests, unlike Loo's, were short-lived and soon forgotten.

"But the last is grand!" she went on. "Loo and Loll, dressed up like Indians, are going to take Prince and put an old pair of shafts on him and let them hang down with a sledge tied to them, and Loll, all wrapped up in a red blanket, will sit on it, while Loo, with feathers on his head, and a bow and arrow in his hand, will be on top."

"That's fine!" cried the boys.

"Now, listen, for that's only the beginning. The first act will be Max's juggling, the second, your nonsense with Thistle; third, my turn on Bob——"

"Oh, I wish you'd jump through the hoop! You did it once all right," said Lee, half scolding, half pleading.

"Oh, Lee, I'm afraid," began Lona hastily, but with a daring look in her eyes that Max saw and tried to quench by saying decidedly, "Don't you let her do it, Lee; she could easily kill herself by falling at the horse's heels and frightening him so he'd kick — and Mlle. Angela DeRebo would ascend to higher regions in a hanging basket."

"I guess that's right, Lon," said Lee prudently.

"I'll see," answered Lona, who was a little contrary after all, and as soon as a spice of danger had been suggested in a prank, decided to do that very thing; though she went on reading calmly enough. "Then, Loo and Loll's trapeze acting."

"Scott! It won't be a thing but real work to have it," laughed lazy Loo.

"It will be fun!" corrected Lona decidedly.

"Well, what next?" broke in Max, who was seeing the "friends" in a new light to-day and was bent upon helping Loll keep peace.

"You boys will have to do feats on the turning pole and springboard," replied Lona.

"I guess by the time we get this far in the performance we'll be all head," said Max laughingly.

"Why?" asked Lona.

"Either it will come off so well we'll be proud as peacocks, or we'll have so many bumps they'll be twice their natural size."

"Father can manage the bumps, so that's all right; but we can't think of anything nice to wind it up with," said Loll.

"Learn a song," suggested Loo.

"No, that's stale," objected Lee.

"I have it," cried Max; "which of you girls dances best?"

"Lollie," promptly responded Lona.

"Then suppose I teach you the *La Varsovienne*, Loll, and you and I will dance it as a grand finale."

"Johnny Brown! That would be fine!" cried Loo, for it left him out.

"What kind of a dance is it?" he asked.

"It's really the national waltz of Germany, and we could wear red and black caps, and sashes. I'll get Jasper to learn the music, because every waltz

wouldn't do, and the German air is so pretty. They dance it at every Dutch wedding."

"Show us how it goes now," begged Lona.

"Come on, Loll, you'll never learn younger. Where's a clear place?"

"Top of the oats-box."

Max and Loll were up in a trice, and for the next fifteen minutes the children watched Loll learn the pretty, graceful dance, while Max whistled the simple air that makes every German heart long for "das Mutterland."

Loll was graceful and light on her feet, and soon caught the steps; so away they went, stamping and turning, and making a pretty picture in the dusty corner of the old barn.

For the next two weeks there was bustling, I tell you. Every time the Quintette (as Dr. Alvoyd now designated the troupe) got together, there was whispering, laughter, and running here and there, until Mammy Clar threatened to lock the nursery and keep the marauders out. Every time their mother and the girls were alone in the little sewing-room the boys heard, "Oh, isn't it lovely! Lona, you look darling! What will they say!"

For "they" had been forbidden to peep even the tiniest bit.

Easter Monday was to be a day of surprises all around; secrets were in the air, but Lona seemed to have a grand one all to herself, and tantalized

the life out of Lee by running off and laughing when he caught her giving something in a white paper to Max's young coachman, Ned. Lee coaxed and scolded, declaring he had never had secrets from her, but Lona only smiled—and kept hers. Tom and Joe were drafted into service, and the "empty" place in the south grove soon began to assume the appearance of a real circus.

First of all, a wide ring was formed by raking the sand smooth and making a hedge by sticking scrub palm into the loose mounds. At each end were two scaffolds with trapezes dangling in the air about six feet from dear mother earth; off under a tree stood Lee's turning pole and spring-board, also a low, wide platform that could be carried and put where wanted. All the carpentry was left to Joe, who received private instructions from Dr. Alvoyd to make everything "ordered," good and strong—he wanted no broken bones to mend.

Day after day the children rehearsed and worked until Lona declared she began to feel like a real Mrs. Barnum. But, as each morning brought some new fun or excitement, no one complained.

At the breakfast table on the Wednesday before Easter, Mrs. Alvoyd said, smiling as though in jest, "Babes, I think your circus will be good enough to invite some of the children you know in Avalon out to see it, don't you?"

"It's going to be fine!" admitted Lee.

"Oh, Mama, may we?" cried Lona, clapping her hands.

"Yes, if Father is willing," she replied, looking over at her husband with a smile at his surprised countenance.

"Oh, I'm willing about anything," cried Dr. Al-voyd gaily; "I have ordered a wagon load of splints and a barrel of arnica. A few bones more or less will make no difference to me—it'll be good practice."

"Why, father, it's not going to break your bones just to watch us. I hope the audience will know how to behave," said Loll mischievously looking up at her father from under her long lashes.

"I'll be good," he promised meekly, but with such a merry twinkle in his eyes that the children knew he was planning some mischief.

"Who could we invite?" asked Lona doubtfully; "we don't know any of the Avalon children very well."

"Father and I know them all and we can ask Stanley Mead, Dolly Leopold, Bert Swain, Alice and Lelia Archer, Clara and Leslie Myerson, Elsie Aldrich, Rose White, Clarence Dawson, Ethel and Jackie Ray and three or four others. You are old enough now to enjoy the pleasure of friendships of children of your own age, so we will invite them all."

"Mama, won't you please write the invitations," coaxed Lona. "Loll has to go over to Althea, the boys are trying to make something in the barn, and I have to practise something very important," she added in a whisper.

"Yes, dear," and in a very few moments Mrs. Alvoyd came out to where the children were saying good-bye to Loll, on the veranda. "How will this do?" she asked, handing Lee a small pink sheet of paper.

"Mama! Where in the world did you get it?" he cried, displaying to the wondering eyes of the rest a tiny picture of a circus tent up in one corner of the sheet.

"I painted it."

"Just now?" asked Loo, marveling at such rapid work.

"Mama, how long have you and father been thinking about inviting somebody out to see our show?" demanded Lona, suspiciously, a great light beginning to break upon some mysterious smiles and nods that had been passing between her parents the last day or two.

But her mother seemed to have taken a sudden interest in the arrangement of Lollie's curls, and as Lee began to read the invitation at that moment Lona never received an answer.

"ROSEMONT PLANTATION,**"April 10, 18—.**

"The Misses and Messrs. Alvoyd request the pleasure of your presence at a Circus to be given by the Mlles. Angela and Annet DeRebo, and the Signors Lucian and Marco Cordova, in honor of the recovery of their dear little sister, Althea Alvoyd. Performance on Easter Monday, at three P. M., Rosemont Grove, April 15, 18—."

"Won't they all wonder who in Jericho the Mlles. and Signors are!" cried Loo, dancing a jig by way of expressing his delight at being a Marco.

After Loll had driven off with her father, Lona went into the library to assist her mother in completing the list of guests.

"Mama," she exclaimed, suddenly, putting down her pen, "we can't ask so many — because where could we seat them so they can see — chairs will be too low."

"How were you going to manage about us?" asked her mother.

"Why, we thought you could all sit in the barouche — just you and father and Althea."

"Then use that plan for everybody. Get out all the carriages and put chairs in all the wagons and carts; climbing into them will only add to the fun."

"Oh, Mama, I'm so glad you were born, you're

so good!" and Lona bestowed a rapturous hug upon her pretty mother.

"I'm glad you were born, my darling," answered Mrs. Alvoyd tenderly; "not because you are so good, but because you're so sweet," she added, holding her first-born daughter close in her arms for a moment.

"You'd better tell the boys about the wagons, dear, for I rather imagine they are trying to make high benches."

"Oh, I guess they are," and Lona raced off, singing away at the top of her voice as she ran through the gardens to tell the boys the new plan.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CIRCUS.

EASTER dawned bright and lovely. Old Ponce de Leon named you well "fair Florida," and I know it must have been an Easter Day like this when he came sailing to your flowery strand.

The sun was dazzling in a deep blue sky, and the air was heavy with the perfumed breath of countless full bloomed blossoms; for the buds seemed to have waited for the mystic touch of the Resurrection Morn to raise them in all their beauty, and now the whole world seemed breathing with flowers.

The twins, in gala dress, sat on the steps waiting for the carriage that was to bring Althea back into their lives again — for at last she was coming home.

"Isn't this the grandest day," said Lee, breathing the balmy air, with a happy, deep breath.

"Yes, I'm glad I'm alive," sighed Loll, with a smile.

"I'm glad of that, too," and Lona put her arm around her sister; for though the deepest love of each was given to her twin, the little sisters loved one another tenderly.

"We were waiting just like this Christmas Eve,"

said Loo thoughtfully. "Althea was coming then, too."

"Oh, but how different!" said Lona. "We didn't even know her. Everything's changed since she came, and we might never have known Max as well as we do if he had not found her."

"Father used to call us the 'Quartette,' but he said last night he was going to change it to the 'Sixtette' and make us stay so."

"Boys, do you know that Althea calls Mama, Mama, and Father, Papa, now, just as we do?" asked Loll suddenly.

"She does!" exclaimed Lee, his eyes opening wide. "Why, I thought she'd never forget her Mama from the way she used to cry for her when she first came."

"Well, she never speaks of her own mother any more. I guess she's forgotten most everything."

"Poor little thing!" said Lee pityingly. "But I think it's a good thing she has. We can all start over again and maybe we'll be happier. Say," he went on quickly, glad to change the subject, for though none of them had looked at Loo they knew he had flushed scarlet at Lee's "we can all start over again."

"I think it's kind of funny Max doesn't seem to care a bit about Althea coming home, now, and you remember what he said to father that day about them having 'so little.' "

"I know there is some kind of a secret about it," said Loll, "for I heard Mama say to him yesterday, 'Never mind, dear, it will only be for a few days,' and Max said kind of gloomy, 'I don't know whether I want it or not.'"

"What do you think it is?" asked Loo; but he received no answer, for just then the carriage turned into the drive and they all started pell mell for the mounting block to welcome, with loving hearts and open arms, Althea's second entrance into Rosemont.

Pale and weak, she sat bolstered up with soft pillows next to their mother, while Max and their father on the seat opposite smiled and bowed as though they considered themselves entirely responsible for the triumphal return. And I think they were.

"Hurrah for Sister Althea!" cried Lee as the carriage swept up the block.

"Hurrah, Hurrah!" chorused everybody — even the heroine herself, when Dr. Alvoyd lifted her down.

The boys were really shocked at the changed appearance, for this was the first time they had had a good look at Althea since the day she was lost; then she was small and chubby and had golden curls way below her stout little waist; but now she was quite tall and slender and the tiny ringlets peeping from under her lace cap made her look like — another Althea.

Lo went forward and took her thin little hands in his, and tried to say something, but a big lump in his throat wouldn't go away, so he just put his arms around her and kissed her before them all.

Before the others had time even to greet her, Dr. Alvoyd caught her up and carried her to the "throne," a big easy chair filled with pillows and draped with flowers; then, after she was all "comfy" and had been kissed and loved all around, the children ran into the house, and when they returned each brought a little Easter gift. Lee's was a big nest full of the rabbit's gayest eggs; Lona brought a lovely baby doll, dressed in long white clothes; Loll put a brand new trunk just filled with tiny wardrobe for it on the table beside her, and Loo slipped a chain, with the dearest toy watch, around her neck, and Lollie's picture was pasted on the inside of the cunning little lid. Althea was too happy for words and with her dolly in one hand, her watch in the other, and her lap full of the bright eggs, smiled and beamed on them all like a cheery white and gold northern daisy.

Suddenly Max began to laugh as though he had just remembered something, and running down to the carriage, brought up a large bundle. It proved to be a market basket filled with soft wool. Making a deep bow he raised the whole affair above his head saying as fast as he could, while he dumped

a sleepy white kitten out on top of the eggs in Althea's lap,

"Kittie bum fittie
Te alago bittie
Tea-legged, toe-legged
Bow-legged Kittie."

"Say it adain! Say it adain!" begged Althea, laughing so merrily that Max would have said it backwards standing on his head to hear that sweet, soft laugh from the pink lips (that had been white and drooping so long), so he increased their merriment by turning the tables on themselves and repeating the jingle in a new way,

"Allie bum tallie
Te alego fallie
Tea-legged toe-legged
Bow-legged Allie.

"Listen to me make Lucillian a Chinaman,—

"Loo bum too
Te alego foo
Tea-legged toe-legged
Bow-legged Loo."

The shouts of gaiety brought Mrs. Alvoyd hurriedly to the scene, and after enjoying the frolic and nonsense with them for a time she asked Max

to carry their little birdling to her nest in the nursery.

They made a pretty picture, as Max obeyed her, and stood in the arched doorway to let Althea wave good-bye to the twins — the tall, strong boy, with the frail fair-haired child in his arms; while over their shoulder blinked and winked the bright, inquisitive eyes of mistress Kitty.

Max went home at noon. "I couldn't let Maudechen have a festive-day dinner alone," he said simply when pressed to remain with the "friends." But he was back again at four and the troupe walked quietly down to the "Circus Grounds" to take a final look at the magnificence of the decorations.

To the twins, Sunday was not the day of gloom it is to many children; but a calm, pleasant time spent in doing just as they pleased without forgetting it was the Sabbath. In the morning they attended High Mass in the small white chapel in Avalon; in the afternoon they read, played quiet games, or went rowing on the river; but Sunday evening was the sweetest time of all the week, for the family spent the dreamy hours after tea in the rose-arbor. Sometimes they talked of the days when the twins were babies, of the joy and consternation when they had been born; or went over some event of the week that had left a mark on some heart of the group, whether pleasant or sad. Then,

father would tell them stories, those that never grow old, of the spotless Life that began so mysteriously at Bethlehem, and ended so sorrowfully on Calvary; sometimes of the great wide world beyond Avalon of which the children knew so little; but oftenest of the rosy futures the twins longed for and the parents, wise in their years, planned to meet.

The week ended ever the same, a stroll through the plaza, and, before the last good-night, to gather in the bright corner by the piano and, while their mother played the plaintive melody, sing the sweetest song ever sung,

"Be it ever so humble, there is no place like home."

In after years, when the paths of even the "twins" had parted, the memory of that dear scene would bring the hearts of the Rosemont household back to the old, happy haunts, though oceans rolled between each member.

This evening, Max was with them and the conversation was mostly of "Althea and the Circus," for every one of the little pink notes had been responded to, and the audience promised to be large.

"Mama," said Loo, putting his arm around his mother as they all walked back to the house in the moonlight, after having watched Max canter down to the bridge, "I love Althea most as much as I do Lolly, now."

Mrs. Alvoyd knew the few boyish words meant a whole confession, so she simply kissed him softly and said, "I know you do, my darling, and always be good to the little sister, for my sake, Loo; for I have promised to make her happy, and I do love her so much," replied his mother earnestly.

"I will truly, Mama," he whispered as they joined the others.

The next morning the children were astir with the sun; for there was still a thousand and one things to see to, besides they all were to take turns in staying with Althea and amusing her.

At ten o'clock Max, who had arrived about seven, mysteriously disappeared.

"Mama," cried Lee running into his mother's room, "do you know where Max is?"

"I believe he has gone home," she answered vaguely, as she bent over some little blue bows for Althea's party dress.

"Why, it's funny for him to go off and never say a word about it to us," said Lee rather indignantly.

"O I suppose he went after something; but he will be back for dinner, as I have invited him."

"Well, everything is done. Only he always says when he's going and what for. Maybe he's in with Althea," and Lee started for the door, but his mother stopped him, saying softly,

"No, he isn't, dear; for I just had her put to sleep, so she will be able to stand the excitement of

this afternoon. He will be here presently," she said, as Lee marched off.

But Max didn't come, and by twelve o'clock even Mrs. Alvoyd was casting anxious glances over to the Court Ledge Road, when the twins came racing up the drive, crying excitedly, "Mama, Mama, here comes our barouche with father — and — Max and — a — lady in it!"

Almost before the children had time to wonder who the stranger could be, the carriage drew near enough for them to recognize Max's mother seated beside that smiling young gentleman.

"Oh, it's Max's Mama! It's Aunty Maudechen!" cried the whole set, dancing up and down in their happiness and surprise.

"This is a part of my secret," cried Max as he assisted the doctor in carrying his mother up to the veranda where Mrs. Alvoyd greeted her with a fervent kiss, but with a lack of surprise that astounded the twins, and made Lona whisper to Lee, "We got up the plan about surprises, but seem to be getting the worst of it."

All eyes at this moment were drawn to the door through which Althea came, crying in decided protest, "I'm ain't doing to wait, I want my Mama" — but she suddenly stopped and stood still with amazement at the sight of Max and "Auntie," serenely seated on her veranda.

"Why, doodness!" was all she had time to gasp,

for Dr. Alvoyd caught her up, and with her perched on his shoulder headed the procession to the dining-room.

My! what a merry dinner that was, with Althea back in her old place between Papa and Lolly, and Mrs. Melody next to Mama.

As soon as it was over, however, the boys and Lona raced off for something — Athea couldn't find out what, but as Mama, and Loll, and Aunty were there she was content until a crowd of strange boys and girls began to arrive, and she heard nothing but "circus, circus," on every hand so she slipped up to Mrs. Alvoyd, for she couldn't even find Lolly now, and asked, in a loud whisper, "Mama, tant I do to a circes?"

"Why, Althea," laughed Stanley Mead, lifting her to his lap, "the circus is coming to you."

"O, doody, when?" cried the child, smiling up at him in such a friendly way that the boy forgot to answer as he watched the smiles deepen in her blue eyes.

Clara Myerson, a sweet-faced girl of ten, came over to them and said gaily, "Stanley, Mrs. Alvoyd just said it is nearly three, but I'd like to get a glimpse of Lucille and Leona. Do you know where they are?"

"No, I haven't even seen the boys, but——"

"I am afraid they are so busy with Mlles. Angela and Annet you will not see them until the perfor-

mance," laughed Mrs. Alvoyd, coming to them and holding out her hand to Althea, for the dinner-gong was announcing that the "Circus Gates" were about to open; and leading the way to the various vehicles she soon had the audience seated.

"Everybody's come!" cried Lee in triumph as he peeped around the dressing-room curtain.

"I should say they have — and more too," laughed Lona, pushing him away to have a peek.

"Now, Loll, don't you get scared when I let go your hands on the trapeze," begged Loo, going up to his twin who sat on a box wrapped in an old red blanket, "squaw"-fashion.

"I'll try not to; but I'm awfully scary already, the swings are so high, and with everybody looking," moaned timid Loll.

"Well, you can't kill yourself, even if you do fall, 'cause Joe has got stacks of hay put under us when we act," answered her brother consolingly.

"You don't have to 'kill' yourself to get all knocked to bits," and Loll looked dolefully up at the sky, as though she expected to see more of it before the day was over.

"Don't be afraid, I'll see you don't get hurt," Loo answered with an air of boyish superiority.

"Lona, you look simply fine!" said Max, coming up to the little girl as she sat upon Bob, dressed in a bright scarlet silk blouse and stockings, no shoes and a dozen tarlatan skirts that came just to her knees.

"She looks exactly like 'Ella' in 'Toby Tyler,'" said Lee, approvingly.

"Loll's got a dress just like it for the act on the trapeze," said Loo, not intending anyone should suppose his twin was going to look like a "squaw" all through the performance.

"It's three sharp!" whispered Max, hurrying over to the "peep." At the word, the colored musicians began a lively march, the curtains were pulled back, and Joe's two little grandsons headed the "parade," drawing a flag and flower bedecked cart on which reposed, like a conquering hero, Guardy.

Storms of applause followed, for everyone knew what a great part the handsome dog had taken in the finding of Dr. Alvoyd's adopted daughter, though few present had ever seen Althea before—and many curious glances were sent to the old English barouche in which she sat, looking more like a mid-summer fairy than ever in her fluffy lace dress and short baby curls.

With a flourish the curtains parted again and big black Bob trotted out with Lona, sitting gracefully on his back.

"Fo' pity sakes, it's Leona Alvoyd herself!" cried Ethel Ray as she recognized Mlle. Angela by her dusky curls, and the storm of applause which followed this information came near sending staid Bob cantering off through the trees. But Lona, like a true horsewoman, gathered the reins firmly

in one hand and while she patted her steed's shiny neck, talked soothingly to the plantation pet. Max, in an old green velvet doublet and white blouse, and carrying two large American flags, followed on Spitfire. Then came Lee, in regulation clown make-up, on balky Thistle, and caused a great laugh because she would only go when her rider sounded his bugle first in one ear and then in the other; thus, her pace was neither a trot nor a canter, but a jerky stalk, with frequent stops to express her astonishment at such unusual bribes. Suddenly the music stopped, and a series of loud war-cries took its place, and Prince cantered into the ring bearing a swarthy young Indian brave, in paint, feathers, and blanket, while at his heels bounced a sledge upon which wobbled a rosy little squaw, whose dark eyes seemed glued to her charger's black hoofs. Everyone laughed and shouted until the performers made two trips around the ring — then each in turn stood about, faced the audience, bowed very low and disappeared behind the white curtain.

Joe and Jasper hurriedly took the turning pole in the ring, and Max gave an exhibiton of the German method of strengthening young muscles and did some interesting turning, for he had taken a class prize in the Turnerfest at the Berlin Academy.

Lee made them all laugh by walking on his hands and leading his coy young donkey about by a piece of ribbon, one end of which was tied around her

neck while the other was held in his own mouth; which performance seemed to amuse her donkeyship so much that she actually ambled after him as fast as he could go. But he finally made her so balky that it took the combined efforts of the six musicians to start her; but like a ball going down hill, once started she went with a will and left her wheedlers, wild-eyed with astonishment, seated in six different parts of the ring, while she tore off through the hedge, as though to shake the dust of all circuses from her hoofs forever more.

After the merriment had died down, and the minstrels stolen sheepishly back to the music-stand, the first bars of a pretty waltz floated over the ring, the curtains were pulled aside and Bob trotted back into the circle with Lona standing firmly erect on his back.

"Oh, Irving, how could you allow it?" reproachfully whispered poor Mrs. Alvoyd, trembling for the safety of her daughter.

"My dear, I did not know it," calmly answered her husband; "but it's too late to interfere now, and Max won't let her hurt herself."

He did open his eyes though as Lona dropped the bridle, poised herself on one foot and threw kisses to the right and left of her.

A perfect hush followed, and if the fear of startling her and making her fall had not sealed her mother's lips, I'm afraid the best "act" of the cir-

cus would have come to an untimely end. But the boys and girls were enjoying it immensely and applauded until with flaming cheeks and sparkling eyes the little rider leaned over and whispered something to Ned.

The boy shook his woolly head, but with a proud little toss of hers, Lona repeated her order, and the boy reluctantly reached back and lifted from among the bushes a large flag-draped hoop, and springing upon a box held it directly over Bob's path.

"Leave her alone. She's all right," whispered Dr. Alvoyd, placing his hand on his wife's arm as she attempted to rise, and while he was speaking Bob reached the hoop and with a light spring Lona was through it and safely back on the horse's back, for an instant longer she stood erect, then slipped off, and leaving Bob cantering aimlessly around the ring, ran headlong through the curtains, and disappeared.

Althea led the shouts of applause and clapped her weak hands until they were tired; Mrs. Alvoyd sat, with her lips pressed tightly together, pleased and displeased, for Lona had told her of a secret and grand surprise and that she must not ask questions, but she had never dreamed of what the child really meant.

"How daring that dear child is!" cried Mrs. Melody, carried back to her own happy girlhood by the children's frolic.

"I think she did splendidly!" answered Dr. Alvoyd serenely, smiling at his wife's doleful face.

"Leona Alvoyd, you're a trump!" And that young lady's twin executed a dramatic hug as the curtains fell behind her.

"How did you ever practise it and we not know?" cried Loo, while Loll half laughing and half crying knelt before her sister and felt over her sturdy little body for possible breaks and bruises.

"Listen to the way they're carrying on," cried Max, as the calls and encores grew louder. "Go back, Lona, and just ride around once; but please don't stand up or jump again, because your father trusted me to see you girls didn't get hurt, and what will he think of me now. I'm afraid he's terribly angry already."

"I'll tell him you didn't know anything about it; but I won't jump again because I'm afraid," and Lona rode back, demurely seated on her own little saddle that Max had insisted upon her using.

Loo and Loll did well on the trapeze, especially the swinging work, and were well applauded for the trick of leaving one and catching the other on the wing. Loll fell the first time, but hopped up and sang out in an excited little voice,

"I can do it. Just wait a minute," and, amid the laughter that followed her unprofessional speech, was back on her swing and did even better than Loo.

As for the "acting" most any child could have done it with a little practice; but the costumes, the ring in the orange grove, and the sweet music, covered most of the defects, and the "Circus" was voted a grand success.

To fill in the interval, while Loll changed her dress, Lona recited, to the soft strains of "Gathering Shells by the Seaside," the sad little story of the "Widow's Light."

Then Joe and Jasper carried the platform into the ring, and Max, dressed in black velvet, red stockings, sash and cap, hand in hand with Loll—who looked more like a gipsy princess than a Dutch maiden, in her scarlet cap and sash—danced the *La Varsovienne*.

As though in preparation for another number, the platform was carried off, and to the dreamy strains of "Suwanee River," poor Thistle, who had been recaptured at a great loss of temper and time, came clattering into the ring, with a big sign in red letters hanging from her neck,

THAT'S ALL.

The spectators clambered out of wagons and traps, and swarmed into the now unhallowed "ring" and dressing-room to capture the performers in costume, and nearly carried the M^{lle}s. away with praise, and teasing for a repetition of some of the

best parts, but Dr. Alvoyd's timely suggestion that peanuts, ice cream, and cake might be found somewhere about the plaza if anybody cared to look for them, sent the young people off on a "refreshment hunt," and Althea's Circus ended in a merry feast.

Leslie Myerson found the freezer of ice cream in the heart of Loll's honeysuckle hedge and stood guard over it declaring, "no one should have a speck until the cake was found." A shout from Dolly Leopold brought the whole party (minus Leslie) over to the fountain; and there, floating calmly about on the lily pads, were saucers and spoons. But, as little nets were very handy, each guest was soon supplied with ice cream equipments, though still no cake, and Leslie was just about to yield his cool charge to the persistent enemy when Alice and Agnes Archer appeared, bearing two baskets of dainty cake that had been discovered roosting under Dr. Alvoyd's pet Hybiscus ("Papa's hot biscuit tree" as the twins called it).

* * * * *

After bidding the last little guest good-bye at the gates, weary, but happy, the troupe came slowly back to the house and joined their parents and Althea as they sat quietly talking on the cool veranda; and there, in the calm of the evening, received the greatest surprise of the day — Max's secret.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRIP.

"**M**R. ALVOYD, won't you please tell our secret now? I can't keep it a bit longer," called Max from the hammock, where he and the boys were struggling for room; while the girls sat on the steps laughing, as first one and then the other tumbled out, much after the fashion of young birds in an over-crowded nest.

"Well, I'll relieve you of the responsibility at once, then; for you would surely begin at the wrong end," returned Dr. Alvoyd, pleasantly. "Come here, chicks," and as the children gathered around him he went on, quietly,

"Mrs. Melody and Max are going to pay us a little visit and then Wednesday they are going down to Jacksonville for awhile. Max will be gone a week; but his mother will stay longer. She is going to spend several months at Holy Rosary Hospital, and during that time Max is going to pay us a visit here at Rosemont."

"Oh, Goody."

"Hurrah!"

"Won't we have high old times!" cried the twins, forgetting in the pleasure of having their friend

right in the house with them the serious part of the program.

"After my mother is better, we will," and Max looked over at her thoughtfully.

"I think I shall be better very shortly, dear, and will want to think of you as having a pleasant time with our friends," for that was the term the many nicknames of the Six had dwindled down to, and Mrs. Melody smiled brightly into her son's grave eyes.

"Of course they're to have a good time. For that matter I have never been able to prevent them," cried Mrs. Alvoyd, merrily, "and as you are not going to be really ill we'll be prepared for red-handed scrapes."

"That's not all, Dr. Alvoyd," reminded Max.

"I know it, but, like the boy with the one stick of candy, I've saved the best bite for the last. As Mrs. Melody will be in the hospital for three days before the operation Max would find it very lonesome all alone in a strange city, so he wants you, Lee, to go and spend the week in Jacksonville with him."

"Oh, Father," and Lee turned pale with delight at the very thought.

"That is our plan, son, but Mama has not been quite won over to it, yet," and Dr. Alvoyd looked at his wife in a way that the children knew meant the final decision remained with her.

"Oh, Mama, please let me go!" begged Lee, rushing over and sitting on the arm of his mother's chair, and taking both of her hands in his. "Please, let me go, and I'll be good and I won't get hurt, and I won't go to a single place without Max; and — and — I'll write you a letter every single day!" and Lee ended his promises of angelic behavior with a flourish — for he had the same aversion to letter-writing that most boys of thirteen have.

"Mrs. Alvoyd, do say 'Yes,' because we're to stay at Dr. Pounds, and Lee's friend Frank will be with us most of the time and I've traveled so much I can take good care of him," Max broke in convincingly.

"Oh, Mama, please!" was all Lee added, but he looked whole volumes as his mother fixed her blue eyes on his, while she said, speaking slowly and directly to him,

"Yes, dear, I'm willing to let you go, if you promise me you will go no place you think Father and I would not wish you to; will stay with Max or Frank, and, as you say, write to us every day."

"You can write postal cards," proposed Lona, ever ready with a plan. Lee nearly killed each member of the family by excess of affection, for the first few minutes after the great verdict.

"I am happy too, dear," said Mrs. Melody gently, "and I've promised your mother to have you report daily to me, and send her accounts of

you both. You have been to Jacksonville before and can show Max the beauties of a Southern American city. You see he knows so little of his country's possibilities."

"Oh, I'll show him everything!" was the generous, but rash reply.

Loo felt that being the only other boy in the family he might have been asked to go too, and was just beginning to grow miserably jealous over the thought, when Althea came over and climbing into his lap coaxed sweetly,

"Looy, will you tate me for a wide in do morning if Lee does far away?" For Lee had given her a little drive about the grounds that morning before his father had left on his visits, and had promised to do so every day. The sight of her tiny curls flooded Loo's memory with all the misery and sorrow his other unkindness had brought upon them, and made him check the little demon and say, cheerily, "Yes, sir, and we'll take so many of your dolls they'll have to stick out through every crack, and all the children we meet will think it's Santa Claus himself coming along the road."

"Oh, Looy, you's so dood!" and Althea nestled against him with a contented little sigh. "I'se dwedful firsdy," she said after a long pause in which they had listened to all sorts of magnificent plans of the "travelers" as the two scamps began to call themselves.

"I'll get you a drink, Blossom," and Loo rose to wait upon the child he used to think he hated.

"I wish we could all go," said Lee, generously, as Loo came back and held the glass to Althea's lips.

"No, sir. You may go, but leave us the three Graces for company. We are going to have a nice time, too," laughed his mother in reply, who first with pain, and then a Te Deum in her heart, had watched the bright smile follow the sullen frown on Loo's sensitive face.

"That's a splendid name for them," exclaimed Dr. Alvoyd, in an amused voice, as the girls and Loo fell into the graceful pose of the three maidens who adorned the library case, "Grace, Disgrace, and Scapegrace."

"Who's 'Disgrace,' Mr. Papa?" cried Lona, threatening him with the half-filled glass she had taken from Loo.

"That's telling; but you may guess."

"What is I, Papa, what is I?" cried Althea, slipping out of the chair and clasping her thin little hands about his knee.

"Cupid, of course," responded Dr. Alvoyd, freeing himself from her weak grasp and tossing her up to the roses above the tressel, for "children" were the passion of that fine man's heart, and he fairly worshiped his new little daughter.

"Well, when are you going?" asked Lona, who,

now that everything was settled, wanted the excitement of seeing the party off.

"Father is going to Jacksonville with them on the Wednesday morning boat; but he will be back Saturday and the boys will come home Thursday — then good, earnest work to make up for the holiday," said Mrs. Alvoyd.

Being a boy, it took little preparation to have Lee ready for the trip. His father's dress-suit case was large enough for his simple linen suits, and Wednesday's sun found him up and dressed, and wandering about the house with the neatly strapped case clasped tightly in his hand.

"Lee, dear, I want you," called his mother, during a lull in the frolic in the hall below, where all the children had assembled for a farewell good time. Lee ran up and as Mrs. Alvoyd closed the door after him she handed him a little purse saying seriously,

"Dearie, father put five dollars in this for you; spend it for a pleasant time, but remember: before you leave send Mrs. Pounds a box of candy in compliment of having been her guest, and be sure to bring each of the children some little gift. And, Lee, don't write postals to us — a gentleman never sends them to a lady, and, while he might not say so just now, I do not believe Father would like me to receive one from you."

"All right, Mama, I won't."

"Don't try to write a letter every day, pet, just a note will do."

"Come on, Lee. Here's the carriage," came up from the veranda.

"Now, good-bye, my darling," said Mrs. Alvoyd, putting her arms around him and kissing him again and again, "just be yourself, Lee, my good, faithful boy."

"I will, Mama. You and Father have trusted me and I'll be good."

"Good-bye, good-bye! Have a fine time——" and the carriage rolled away with the party bound for Jacksonville.

When the children came in to tea the next evening, Lona found a large envelope lying on her plate, and running to the window read in a happy voice that ended in a laugh as she wandered through the mazes of the address,

Miss Leona Alvoyd,
Rosemont Plantation,
Avalon County,
Florida,
U. S. of America,
Northern Continent,
Western Hemisphere.

"Well, that rascal! You'd think he was sending it to the North Pole."

"For pity sakes, open it and let's hear what he says," cried impatient Loo.

"Oh, Mama, you read it," and Lona handed the letter to her mother, too excited to make out the words.

Two large sheets contained Lee's first account to the home guard.

JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA,
April 18, 18—.

MY DEAREST FAMILY —

"You'd think it was father," commented Loll, with a suppressed giggle.

"Oh, Loll, listen," said Lona, as their mother continued to read.

"Hope you get this all right, for I have written the address very plainly, but if you don't, let me know. We enjoyed the trip ever and ever so much. Max said it was the narrowest river he ever saw — they call streams of that size 'creeks' in Europe. He kept saying, 'Lee, let's step ashore and walk awhile.' Of course, he was only teasing, for the river is really twenty-five feet wide.

"We arrived here about six o'clock and had tea in 'our café,' the one where we always go when we come on the 'Birthday Journey,' and then we drove right out here to the hospital. Father and Max went to Mrs. Melody's room with her and I was left in the dark parlor alone for a while. Oh, Lona,

it's a creepy kind of a place, for doctors and nurses with white caps on kept hurrying through the halls, and I saw them carry someone by the door on a stretcher, and I was so scared my hair stood up so straight that my cap flew off; but just then the door opened wide, and a Sister of Charity came in with a big boy about eighteen.

"Now, Pat," she said real kindly, "it's against the rules to allow outsiders to sleep in the hospital, but I know how you feel, so I'll make you as comfortable as I can in here, and call you the moment she becomes conscious."

"He's a great tall fellow; but I know he was almost crying, for he only shook his head and said real low, 'Please do, Sister.'

"Then she went off, and came back with a pillow and a blanket, and put them on a big lounge for him. Then she turned and asked if she could do anything for me, I was just going to say 'No' when I saw this paper and pen and asked if I might use them — so here I am writing away in a hospital parlor and that other poor fellow is going to sleep over in the corner. I wish he'd talk; I'm getting tired waiting and waiting. Hurrah, here comes Father and Max, so

"Good-night, I am having a grand time. Give my dearest love to Mama, and everybody.

"Your loving twin,
"LEE,"

ROSEMONT PLANTATION,
April 19, 18—.

DEAREST, DEAR LEE —

Your letter went astray; they couldn't find me, because you forgot to put the street I live on, in the address; but I was glad to hear you were having a fine time.

"Did you find out who "she" was? I'd love to know all about 'em, because Mama said they must be Irish, if his name is "Pat."

I am writing in bed, so please excuse lead pencil. Mama made us all come to bed at half past six o'clock, not because we were in mischief, but we had a terrible time this afternoon. About four o'clock we started for a drive and thought we'd go up to Passaic for a change, as Althea has never been that far before, so off we go and get there about five o'clock, and had a glass of milk and some cookies from the old toll-gate keeper at the cross road; and then started home again.

Well, when we had ridden about a mile we noticed some clouds in the East, and before we knew what was happening, it began to rain like fury. Joe jumped out and put up the top of the barouche and Mama wrapped Althea in both of the lap-robés and made her stand against the seat and we all crowded into it to protect her; because Mama said it might make her very sick again to get wet.

But I wish you could have seen the rest of us

by the time we had gone the other four miles—we looked like drowned chickens; we were soaking even to our shoes (for it never stopped pouring a second until we got home). Loo took off his blouse and put it on Althea and she never even got damp. Mammy Clar put us all to bed as quick as lightning and gave us something hot to drink, and we have had our tea up here too. Mama and Althea are in Loll's bed, and she and I are in mine. Loo is in your room with the door open, and Mama is going to read "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to us, so Good-bye.

We all miss you dreadfully especially your loving twin

LONA.

DEAR LEE—

Professor Morgan came back from the North to-day, and we started the new part of the history, "Philadelphia during the Revolution." It's fine because he has been in all the places we've read about, even up in the old tower of Independence Hall. Don't you remember that poem Father read to us, about the little boy who called up to his Grandfather, "Ring, Grandpa, ring"? That's the tower, and Mr. Morgan has even touched the Liberty Bell. He gave us a daisy picture of it, and made us learn the inscription by heart. We read it right off the picture, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof. July 4, 1776."

He read to us too, out of a new book he brought you and me, "With Lafayette at Yorktown." It's great.

Well this is all I can think of.

Yours truly,

BROTHER LOOLY.

P. S. Notice the rhyme.

DEAR LEE —

Mama is ready to read to us and we're just to where Eva dies, so I want to hurry, with love

LOLL.

DEARY LEE —

I love you.

Your little sister,

ALTHEA.

To wind up the budget Lona wrote in tall capitals,
GOOD NIGHT.

JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA.

DEAR, DEAR MAMA —

Father is going to take this to you so he'll tell you all about Mrs. Melody's operation (I don't know much about it except that it took a half hour and she is all right now); Max was with her for a long time after it was over, so was Father.

I stayed down in the parlor again and was just going to write this letter, when who should come

in but that "Pat." He looked at me and I looked at him and then I laughed and said politely,

"How is she to-day?" He looked so surprised and said gloomily,

"She's no better — an' the doctors do be saying she never will be."

"Is it your mother?" I asked, thinking of you, Mam.

"Oh no," he said, "she's me little sister."

"What's the matter with her?" I said pretty quick, for I was kind of afraid he was going to say diptheria.

"She's a cripple!" he answered, just as stern as could be, and jumped up and walked over to the window. I thought he was mad at my asking so many questions; so I kept quiet, but suddenly he turned round and said very low,

"Say, you're here with your father, ain't you?"

"Yes, but he is not sick," I said, wondering what he meant.

"I know he ain't sick; but he's a doctor, ain't he?" he answered impatiently.

"Yes, and he is the best homeopath in Florida," I said, kind of proud, because I heard you say that once.

At that, Pat came over and put his hand on my arm and said wildly, or I guess you'd say, desperately, "Say, Kid, do you think he'd talk to me if I promised to pay him as soon as I could? I

haven't any money to spare till I know what they'll be after wanting to do to Nora, but honest, Kid, I'd pay him some day sure as I live."

Mama, I didn't know what to do—I never heard anything so terrible; but I said right away as cheerful as I could, "Why, my father will be glad to help you, and—" Before I had time to finish, Max and father came in and I told Papa what Pat had said, so he went right up and talked—well, just like he always does, and went straight off to see poor Nora.

Just think, she is only ten years old and lived all alone with her brother. They are like our little Althea used to be, orphans, only Pat worked in the warehouses and earned five dollars a week, and Nora took care of the room (they lived in an old freight-car, out by the tracks); of course it was nasty and damp and she got worse, and the Sisters found her and begged Pat to let them bring her to their hospital and make her comfortable. And now she is going to die! Isn't that terrible for poor Pat, because he'll have to live in the freight car all alone. I'm seeing what books call "the world," and I guess it's not all as nice as Rosemont. Last night Frank, Max, and I went to see Uncle Tom's Cabin. It was just grand, and little Eva looked for all the world like Althea did before she was sick. After the theater Father met us and took us over to "our café" for a little supper. Max says

students in Germany always have a feast after the theater. I've been doing so many things and having such a splendid time that I can't write half; but father will tell you lots, so good-night (it's quarter to eleven!).

Your dear son,

LEE.

ROSEMONT,
Tuesday, April 23rd.

MY DEAREST TWIN —

Oh, we had such a comical time to-day. Professor Morgan had to go off right after lessons, and Mama and Father were going out to Passaic, so there would be no one at home for dinner but just us children; so Mama gave us the funniest surprise. When we came down into the dining-room there was no cloth on the table; just our plates and knifes and forks — and cups instead of glasses. A whole loaf of bread sat on a paper napkin, and instead of a salad the tomatoes were whole too, and piled on a wooden tray. Every single thing was farmer style, and we had a lark I tell you! Loo took the head of the table, and I took the foot. Delfi said we had to wait on ourselves, so we wouldn't pass each other a blessed thing unless we paid toll — and that was to "divvy up." When we turned over our plates, under each one lay a plain slip of paper; at least, Loo's, Loll's, and

mine were plain; but Althea's had this written on, "You have won it." Well, we hunted and guessed and guessed and what do you think it was?

When Mama came into the nursery about four o'clock, she held her hands behind her, and said laughing, "Who won it?" "Althea, Althea!" we all cried, and then Mama gave her a pretty box of candy, and Althea sat down on the floor and began to divide it all up among us.

She won't let anyone but Loo drive her around, now, and yesterday he was playing with her when Professor Morgan came, and so, of course, he had to come to the school-room; but Althea screamed and screamed, and when Mama went in and said, "Why, Blossom, what is it? What do you want, dear?" she just sat up and said, "Me want more Looy." Wasn't that a cunning way to say she wanted him to come back.

I'm glad you're coming home soon for I miss you dreadfully. Your

LONA.

JACKSONVILLE,
April 24, 18—.

MY OWN DEAR MAMA —

This has been a very sad day and I guess you'll be sorry when you read about it. Poor little Nora died this morning and Pat didn't have anybody to go to the funeral; so Dr. Pounds, Frank, Max, and

I went. Dr. Pounds bought her a little white casket, and Mrs. Pounds sent a pretty white dress and lots of flowers, and we boys went out into the country to an old Irish woman's cottage and bought a basket of shamrock (because Nora and Pat were born in Ireland), and he put a bouquet of it in her hands and a wreath on her head. She was terrible little and pretty. Mrs. Pounds was awful good to Pat and he's never going back to the freight car, but is going to be a coachman for a friend of hers.

A charity patient in the hospital made a small cross out of white wood and put "Nora O'Mara" on it, and we placed it at the head of her grave. Wasn't it nice of him? But I feel gloomy, for I never went to a funeral before; though Dr. Pounds says she never could get well, so she's happier now than she could have been on earth, and that's a comfort.

There was a concert at the St. James Hotel to-night, but we didn't care to go, so Frank taught us a fine new game called "Flags." It's lots of fun and teaches you the flags of every country in the world. To-morrow there is going to be a big, big Circus here and we're all going, even Frank's little sisters and brothers.

Mama, he has a baby brother just two months old, and I never saw such a tiny fellow in all my life. I wager he's the smallest baby in the world (but I didn't tell Frank that). I wish Lolly could

see him; she loves babies so much and she could lose him in her doll coach. We are going to leave here on the morning boat and will reach Avalon about six o'clock, so this is my last letter. With my love (I'm awfully homesick),

YOUR LEE.

P. S. Very important.

I am glad Lona can't see the circus to-morrow for in it a little girl is shot out of a cannon up to a trapeze at the top of the tent, and Mlle. Angela would be trying it herself the first thing you'd know.

L. A.

Bright and early Thursday morning the boys went to the hospital to say good-bye to Max's mother. Mrs. Melody seemed very cheerful and comfortable, and sent them off with many loving messages to the friends at Rosemont. At nine o'clock they drove back for Frank, and at ten sailed ("paddled," Max called it) away. The boat was a small fruit lighter and could not have possibly carried more than twenty passengers, but it gloried in the classical name of "Marathon" and was the delight of old Captain Swain's heart.

The only other passengers beside the boys were a blue-eyed, flaxen-haired German family, who gazed at the American lads with open admiration, and finally, by way of good will, offered them two crisp, salty pretzels, whereupon Max delighted their

homesick hearts by thanking them in German, and doing several small favors for the bewildered father; though most the boys' day was spent in the Captain's tiny cabin, asking questions and listening to marvelous sea stories; for the master of the "Marathon" had been a great "marine" in his day.

At five o'clock, just as the sun was going down, the big German father called the boys out on the deck and asked if they could tell him how far Passaic was from Avalon, and if there was any way he could drive to his brother's farm, a little beyond the town, as his frau was so anxious and the kinders worn out with their weeks of travel. By the time Max, with Lee's assistance, made him understand the distances and the means of travel, a storm had crept up from the east and the semi-darkness gave way to the gloom of midnight.

The boys were enjoying the prospect of a "storm at sea," as they called it, and were beginning to speculate upon who would be at the landing to welcome them; for they were but an hour's ride from home, when suddenly the little boat shuddered; a fearful flash and uproar filled the air — then all the world slipped away.

At the first shock Max threw his arms around Lee, and when the cold water revived him he found himself floundering about in the dark stream with Lee lying limp in his clasp. Poor Max never knew

just what did occur in the next few seconds; nor what might have happened, if a vivid flash of lightning had not revealed the palmetto-covered bank not many feet away.

"Oh, Lee," he begged as he pulled and dragged the boy up the slippery bank, "please open your eyes. I'll never go back to Rosemont if you're dead!"

But his fears were soon set to rest by having the lad open his eyes, much bewildered, it's true, but still they were open, and Max disgraced himself forever in his own eyes by putting his head on Lee's knee and sobbing as though his heart would break.

"What's happened?" asked Lee, in a low, terror-stricken voice.

"I — guess — the — boiler — exploded!" came in muffled gasps from his comrade.

"I wonder — if anybody else was killed," Lee said in such a woe-begone voice that Max sat up and replied, half laughing, "Why, we're not 'killed' — but how quiet it is. I —"

"O listen!"

"Marie! Hans! Gretchen!" and the big German's voice floated out over the water, asking in all the names of love the world ever heard if any of his dear ones were saved. Before the boys could reply a baby's cry and a woman's voice answered, and the strangers in a foreign land were "home" in one another's arms. Like the boys, they had been in

the prow, and were almost tossed ashore by the same monster that had laid the captain and the two deckhands low.

Lee, who had been prowling about in the dark, suddenly discovered that they were in an orange grove, and had Max shout over to the Germans to walk through the one he knew they must be in, and to keep shouting and someone would surely come to their assistance.

"Have you all the children?" called out Max, on second thought.

"Yah, yah, dri kinder! dri kinder!" came the thankful answer.

"Well, if they're 'dry,' it's more than we are," said Max, with a weak attempt at cheerfulness. "I think we ought to call and see if Captain Swain or the men answer," said Lee, after a silence in which they had been shivering, and frightened half out of their wits.

"Captain Swain! Pete! Captain Swain!" they called again and again, but not a sound broke the silence in answer.

"It's no use, Lee; the best thing we can do is to give the alarm and let men with boats and lights do what they can," declared Max, with a desperate ring in his voice, for that terrifying quiet was hard to bear.

"Yes,—but Max, I don't know which way to go," and there was a suspicious quiver in Lee's.

"Well, we will just keep walking — by daylight we'll be somewhere. If we were only sure we were going towards Avalon it wouldn't take us so long, as we were only an hour's ride from there when — when it happened."

"Yes, I know — but I hate to go until I'm sure there isn't something we might do for the poor Captain. Let's call once more."

But again there came no reply, and they sadly faced a long, aimless walk in the storm and darkness; turning away from the only spot they were sure of — the river.

They tramped along in silence for a time, then Lee said drearily, "Oh, dear, don't your feet hurt terribly in such wet shoes!"

"Yes, and I'm hungry as anything. Say, I'd like to know how you could forget to bring the lunch!" replied Max, in pretended angry amazement.

"Why, I left the boat in such a hurry I never thought of it," answered Lee, with a laugh. "But gracious, Max, there must be plenty of oranges about; here, this one is ripe, I can tell by the weight and size of it," he continued, stopping under a tree.

"Good! I'll fill my pockets; so we won't starve anyway."

Again they started on and walked for about an hour, when poor Lee said with a groan, "I can't go another step! I'm almost tired to death!"

"I'm played out, too," sighed Max. "Let's rest

here for a while, because I'm kind of afraid we're only walking in a circle after all."

"Well, if you think that I'm going to sit right here until daylight!" declared Lee with a groan as they dropped under a tree and stared with misty eyes out into the darkness.

Suddenly Lee, who had thrown himself on the ground, started up crying, "What's that!"

"What's what?" demanded Max, in a startled voice, for he had heard nothing.

"Why — why, I thought I heard a wagon rumbling — yes, I did, too; come on, we must be near a road!"

"Hello! Stop! Wait!" they shouted, tearing off in the direction of the now increasing rattle and clatter of a rapidly approaching team.

"Here! What's the matter with you fellows?" cried a gruff voice, as the flying figures darted out of the darkness ahead of the horses.

"Oh, Mr. Reynolds!" cried Lee, surprise and joy in his voice at the discovery that the driver was an old-time farmhand of his father.

"I'm LeRoy Alvoyd, and was coming home from Jacksonville, when the 'Marathon' blew up! And most everybody's killed! And Max Melody and I are lost and we've been walking most all night! Won't you please take us home? We don't know where we are!" Relief, fatigue, and excitement creeping out in one breath.

"Well, I'll be John Browned! You don't say. Why, you're about ten miles from Rosemont — you've been goin' the wrong way, and it's 'most ten o'clock now. I'm goin' into Avalon and will take you as far as Rosemont Road; but my wife's awful sick and I am goin' for medicine and have to get back as quick as I can, so hop in and that will give you only about a mile to walk. The 'Marathon' blew up! I'm jiggered. Never reckoned on that."

"And poor, old Captain Swain!" almost wailed Lee.

"Say, don' you worry about Cap'n Swain; he ain't the kind of a sailor who gets killed on a fruit scow; he'll turn up all right. I reckon he's a-sittin' on the smoke stack this 'dental minute, cussin' like scratch," exclaimed Mr. Reynolds heartily.

His cheerful view of the matter, the comfort of riding, even in wet clothes, and the prospect of a glorious welcome awaiting them at home, brightened the boys wonderfully; so when their friend in need, with a pleasant, "So long," let them down at the crossing to Rosemont Road they walked along in pretty good spirits, even laughing occasionally at their own discomfiture, and probable odd appearance. When they passed through the vine-covered gates they broke into a run and were fairly skimming up the drive when the lights of a carriage gleamed through the trees near the house.

"I bet somebody's going for us," panted Lee; "wait 'till they get nearer and then shout."

"Father! Father! Joe, stop! It's us!" he cried with all the power of his tired lungs as they drew nearer.

"Hi dar, clar de way, chillens; we's goin' fo' the daid," answered Joe in a terror-stricken voice as he partly reined in the horses.

But Doctor and Mrs. Alvoyd had caught the sound of their boy's voice, and before the happy truth had penetrated Joe's big but dull heart, the wet, dirty, bedraggled pair were in the tender shelter of loving arms. Dr. Alvoyd's face was white, but his voice calm, as he questioned the boys about the accident, while Mrs. Alvoyd gave away completely to her mother's love; and, sobbing as though her heart would break, refused to let Lee out of her arms until the carriage stopped in full view of the bright hall-door, through which the children came running, wild with that light-hearted joy which comes only after long hours of suspense.

When the boys, all warm and comfortable, came down for a lunch, the whole adventure had to be repeated, for the children's part of the incident had to be added, as it came out that the whole family had gone down to Avalon to meet the boat at six o'clock; but after waiting over an hour had come home disappointed and just a little uneasy; though they reasoned the boat could easily have been de-

layed, and the boys would drive out when they did arrive. But the whole evening dragged away, and Dr. Alvoyd was just going down to the village again when a messenger arrived with the news of an accident. They waited only long enough for the Doctor to gather his cases, and had just started out on the journey — to find they knew not what, when the "survivors" sailed into port, with colors a bit bedraggled, but safe and sound!

Max's supposition proved correct; the overcharged little boiler of the "Marathon" had exploded, and after the first terrible upheaval the little craft had sunk out of sight in the fathomless river, carrying down with it the bodies of Captain Swain and the two hands, who had been in the engine room at the time. That the boys were saved was due to the spirit of kindness that made them leave a fascinating tale of sea-life, to make the way to a new home clear to the disheartened, confused strangers in a strange land.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER YEAR.

IT was a long time after the excitement of the real “wreck” had subsided before anything but “what might have happened” was talked of. Children, especially boys, are brought face to face with dangers of many kinds, and forget them as quickly as they pass; and many a bright-faced little mother would be white-haired and miserable if she knew how often the lads nearest her heart had just escaped being brought home in half a dozen pieces.

Max and Lee rather enjoyed the “heroing” they received, and, after being safe and dry, for a day or so, began to make light of their part in the disaster; though neither could ever think without sadness of the terrible fate of kind old Captain Swain.

The three months of Mrs. Melody’s stay in Jacksonville passed quickly, and Max, who had spent nearly every Sunday with his mother, was content and happy when she came home, not cured or well, but better.

The reopening of Court Ledge was a grand affair. The twins and Althea had decked the whole place with flowers and flags in a most start-

ling style, and, after a merry welcome and cosy tea in the famous black oak dining-room, like elves in the night they had stolen quietly away, so that Max and his mother might spend their first evening at home together.

The Fourth of July dragged itself along until at last it did reach Rosemont, then fairly took wings and flew; at least that's the way the "friends" looked at it, because for days they had been planning a hundred different frolics, from bombardment of splendid sand castles to the "Battle of Bull Run," and then went through all so quickly that the joy and fun simply bewildered them. From daylight until dark they never rested a second, even eating their lunches "on the wing," for the fireworks' grounds were far away from the buildings, and everyone knows the "Fourth" is no day for feasts — time is too precious.

The day was splendid, but the evening was glorious — for that was their father's part of the program; and for hours a brilliant ascension of balloons, rockets, spinning-wheels, flower-pots, and colored lights made the night resplendent with rainbow shades.

After the Fourth the summer slipped quietly away, and by October the friendship between Rosemont and Court Ledge had grown loyal and strong. The "Twins" were kind and jolly, Max boyish and merry; but beneath his boyishness there lay the

scars of three very hard, unhappy years that helped to make him generous and thoughtful, without losing any of his manliness.

Althea was never again the dear, chubby baby ; for by autumn she had grown into a slender, graceful little girl, with soft, yellow curls falling on her shoulders. She was really idolized by every member of her new family ; but, strangely enough, Lucillian was her special adorer, and to him she was a shameless little tyrant. But her tyranny was love so he humbly obeyed her commands. Althea never remembered that "Looy" had once been unkind to her, and he was always "making up" for something no one fully understood but his mother.

Somehow the two were always to be found together, until at last Doctor Alvoyd nicknamed them Desdemona and Othello.

The characters suited them well ; only, as the years went on, the two stories differed, for Althea taught Loo confidence through love, and that was more than Shakespeare's heroine did.

"Loo, girls, you ought to see the pigeon nests ! Every one is full of lots of little pigeons," cried Lee all excitement, rushing in to where his brothers and sisters were reading and playing in the rose-arbor one warm day in October.

"Oh, let me see the baby pijjies," cried Althea, jumping up and preparing to leave her Babies to their fate at the prospect of seeing real live little birds.

"Oh, Blossom, the nests are way up over the rafters in the barn; I never could get you up there."

"Then bring 'em down to me," calmly ordered the young autocrat.

"Why, sister, if I was to do that, the Mama and Papa pigeons would never, never go back to their little ones. They'd just leave them to starve," explained Lee, with the air of a veteran on birdie parental devotion.

"Oh, the naughty Mamas. Don't you bring 'em down, Lee—I don't want them to starve," and Althea's tender little heart quickly overcame her curiosity and, as though reminded of the duties of a mother, she returned contentedly to her dollies, while the others raced off to the barn.

When Max, who had been directed to the arbor by Mrs. Alvoyd, came into it a half hour later, he was informed by the young housekeeper there that the twins "were on top of the barn, looking at baby pijjies."

The boy sat down and was amusing himself watching Althea's motherly little ways, and asking grave questions as to the health and happiness of her beautiful family, when Loo, with a white face and frightened eyes, came flying up the path.

"Oh, Max," he cried as the boy stepped out of the harbor, "go—down—to the—barn—quick—Lona's hurt—an' I'm—going—for Father."

Max stood still and looked after him for an in-

stant; but Althea rushing past him and crying, in a frightened, loving voice, "Oh, I must do to my poor Mama," brought him to his senses, and while the thoughtful child trotted up to the house, he ran to the barn.

"Where are you?" he called, as he came through the carriage-room, and saw no one.

"Oh, it's Max," answered Loll's voice from the hay-loft. "We're up here—Oh, please, come quick!" And running up the stairs, Max saw Lona lying white and still by the hay-shoot; while Lee and Loll, with pale, tear-stained faces, bent over her in helpless terror.

"What happened?" asked Max, coming over softly.

"She—fell—off—the—rafter," sobbed Loll.

"Well, didn't she fall on the hay?"

"No—yes, she fell on the hay-shoot—first—and oh—she's done something terrible—look at her arm!" and Loll pointed with a trembling finger to Lona's left hand which was hanging limp at her side.

Max stooped over and examined the small brown hand, then said more to himself than to Loll,

"My grief! It's broken."

Lee, who had not spoken a word, now groaned and said miserably, "I was afraid so; father told me once how they looked, and—"

"Where is she?" cried Mrs. Alvoyd's voice from

below, and in a moment she too was kneeling beside Lona.

"Oh, my darling! My precious baby!" she moaned, kissing the white lips and dark curls.

"Lee, how did this terrible thing happen?" she asked, sternly; but the startled look of pain on her boy's face calmed her instantly, and she said, "Dearest, run for Joe. We must move her while she is still unconscious." And in a few moments, Lona was safe on the big lounge in her father's study.

At the first alarm Loo had raced to the bell at the head of the south grove and given it three quick pulls — the family sign to Dr. Alvoyd that he was wanted at once, — and to the relief of the household he soon came cantering up the road at a great pace.

"What is it?" he asked, as he met his wife on the steps.

"Lona has had a bad fall, Irving, and I'm afraid her arm is broken," she answered, as she led the way to the study.

"Oh, Father, Father, my arm hurts terribly," sobbed Lona, piteously, as Dr. Alvoyd bent over her.

"Poor little girl, I know it does; but don't cry and father will have you all comfy in less time than it takes to tell," he answered, soothingly, while he gently cut her loose white sleeve and examined the now rapidly swelling arm.

"Oh, don't!" she screamed as he deftly felt the wound.

"Now listen, daughter," he said seriously; "I must set your arm at once. Will you be my brave girl and let Mama hold your good hand, and let me do the work quickly? It will only take a second, or, if you would rather, I can give you something that will put you to sleep — only that generally makes you feel bad when you wake up."

"Oh, father, don't let it hurt me — do it so it won't hurt me," begged Lona, trembling and crying miserably.

"Very well, dear," and Dr. Alvoyd went over to a cabinet and in a moment came back and held a tiny blue glass to her lips; then, gently laying her back on the pillows, quickly prepared the splints and bandages in readiness for the moment when the bright eyes, that were watching him anxiously, should close.

The children waited uneasily on the stairs near the study door, expecting to hear screams and moans; but everything was so still that they were beginning to imagine all sorts of fearful catastrophes, when the door suddenly opened and out walked Dr. Alvoyd carrying Lona carefully in his arms; and they caught a glimpse of narrow splints and neat white bandages as he turned to go upstairs.

"Oh, Mama," cried Lee, as his mother came into the hall, with Lona's dress and slippers in her

hand; "what is the matter with her? Didn't she cry?"

"No, dear; father gave her something to put her to sleep, so she did not feel the pain, and we want to get her safely in bed before she wakes up. Papa says it is not very bad and she will be all right in a week or so."

Lee gave her a grateful smile as she nodded back at them from over the high banister, for he felt he was to blame for taking the girls up in the barn.

When their father came down after having seen Lona safely out of one sleep and back into another, he found the boys and little girls still in the hall discussing the probable outcome of the terrible disaster.

"Now, Lee, how in the world did all this happen?" he asked with a sigh, as he drew Althea to his knee.

"Well, father, I knew there were lots of eggs in my pigeon nests, but I hadn't been up to see them since Saturday, and when I went up to-day I found stacks and stacks of little ones in every nest. So I came and told the girls, and Loo, and we all went up to look at them. We've often been over the rafters; but just as we started to jump down, a big pigeon flew in at the window, right in front of Lona, and I guess it must have scared her, for I thought she had jumped down, and didn't even look until I heard a funny bump and a scream — and

then I saw she had fallen on the edge of the shoot. But what made her act so, and not speak to us?" and Lee's voice had a strange little break in it.

"Why, the poor little thing fainted," answered Dr. Alvoyd. "I am sorry this has happened, as it may weaken her arm for quite a while, besides making Mama nervous every time you gipsies are out of her sight. I think I'll have to put up little signs all over the place; only instead of 'Keep off the Grass,' I'll have 'Keep on the Earth.'"

"Papa, did you cut off my Lona's arm?" asked Althea, slipping from his lap, and looking at him in alarm.

"No, Blossom, I mended it just as Mama did your big doll the other day, only Lona must be very careful and not hurt it any more, for then it would be very hard to mend," he answered gravely, for he wanted to impress the lesson on them all, and made it a bit more serious than it really was.

"Oh, but Papa, Mama put my dolly on the top shelf on the closet, and we left it there for a whole day before it was well—are you going to do that to Lona?" cried Althea, with a ring of dismay in her silvery little voice.

Everybody laughed, and thus turned the quivering lips into a tremulous smile, for the thought of sister being left in a dark place for a whole day, with no one to love her, or pet her as her child had been a fearful thought to gentle Althea.

"No, baby; Lona is safe in bed with Mama right beside her, and we won't let her be alone a minute," said Dr. Alvoyd, reassuringly, for he believed in fostering the spirit of thoughtfulness and devotion among his little people.

"Well, it frightened the life out of me," sighed Lee, joining his hands under his head, as he lay stretched at full length on a rug at his father's feet.

"Never get frightened at a time like that, son. Do just as Mama did. If the patient faints, as I've seen strong men do, move them to a place of safety as well as comfort, and if a physician is not obtainable at the time, take the law in your own hands, and, with linen bands, gently, but firmly, bind the injured limb. But——"

"Papa, I couldn't have touched her arm for all the money in the world," declared Lee, with a shiver.

"You're not a good son for a doctor," laughed his father. "Now, if it had happened a half-hour later, I would have been on my way to Avalon, and poor Lona would have had a sorry time of it."

"My gracious, this family doesn't get out of one scrape before it's plump into another one," sighed Loll, who was still trembling from fright.

"Daughter, accidents of this kind must be expected in a family where four unfeathered, wingless birdlings think they 'could fly,' as the Dutchman

said." And Dr. Alvoyd rose, to make another visit to the new household invalid before starting on his delayed trip to the village.

As evening stole silently through the orange groves Max rode home and the children gathered in Lona's room, where the young lady lay in state, while Mrs. Alvoyd fed her cream-toast and custard, that Mammy Clar had prepared in her best style for "dat blessed baby."

"Oh, father," cried Loll suddenly, after the "fall" had been discussed and a thousand ways to have prevented it been thought of — though as to this latter subject Dr. and Mrs. Alvoyd seemed to think keeping off the top of buildings the best way; "won't Lona be able to go to Ethel Ray's straw-ride, Thanksgiving night?" For the "Circus" had started a whole series of entertainments, which had brought the Rosemont children into a close comradeship with the young people of Avalon. Before Easter their acquaintance had been scarcely more than in name — by Thanksgiving they had made the beginnings of several friendships that were to prove life long.

"Why, of course she will be able to go — her arm will be in a sling, but the pain will be gone."

"O goody!" cried Lona, in a happy voice; but her mind suddenly became taken up with a very serious problem. "Mama, how will I ever wear a dress with my arm done up like this?" she asked,

looking dolefully at the bandaged, besplintered bundle at her side.

"I'll manage that part of the program, darling," replied her mother comfortingly; "I'll make you some little slips, so you can get into them and not move the naughty arm."

Satisfied with such pleasant arrangements, Lona attempted to sit up, but fell back with a groan and a plaintive, "Oh, dear, it hurts."

"Daughter, if you wish to sit up, ask father and he will lift you; but don't toss about by yourself for that will only cause pain," said Dr. Alvoyd, as he deftly moved her into a comfortable position.

"Please tell us a story, father," said Lona, when her mother had turned down the light, and the rosy glow from the pine-knot fire fell over the room.

"Oh, yes, Papa," pleaded Althea, from the couch where Loo and Loll had her cuddled between them; "a big — long — story all 'bout fairies and dollies and Santa Claus!"

"Well, I have something to tell you. It's not a story exactly, but it's about a fairy, Santa Claus, and four gipsies, with seven arms — one of the party recently lost a limb in battle," merrily answered Dr. Alvoyd; but Mrs. Alvoyd who was on the bed beside Lona softly pressed her "good" hand.

"What is it?" asked Lee, sitting up on his "rug" as every fur robe before every grate in the house was called.

"A Christmas secret," answered his mother, smiling happily into the fire.

"Oh, hurry and tell us!" begged Loll, in a rapture.

"Mama and I have been thinking that an old-fashioned Southern Christmas-tree party would be splendid fun this year," said Dr. Alvoyd, smiling into the five eager young faces turned to his. "Have a stocking and a small gift for every one, a feast and a jolly good time to finish up the party with."

"Oh, wouldn't it be grand! Mama, please let us have it. Won't Max think it fine! Santa Taus is toming! Santa Taus is toming!" sang Althea, clapping her hands in joy.

"How did you ever think of anything so beautiful?" asked Loll, with a happy laugh.

"I had one every year before Uncle Tome was killed," answered her father, his face grave for an instant, for his boy-uncle had been the idol of his childhood, and the grief and desolation that filled Rosemont in the days which followed his departure for the war was still remembered by him with regret.

"Beautiful Uncle Tome!" said Lona softly, for the short history of the handsome young soldier, whose picture hung in the hall, and who in the second battle of Bull Run had lost his life carrying the body of his wounded commander off the field

of victory, was well known to the Rosemont twins.

They now settled back with sighs and smiles in anticipation as their father continued: "Instead of having the tree in the library, as usual, Mama has written to Santa Claus to see if he would trim it out on the plaza, as he used to, if we furnished the tree. She told him that we would use the small electric lights he left last year, and that, somewhere in the old stable, she thought I still had the iron hanging baskets for extra illumination——"

"What are they?" asked Lee.

"Baskets of wire net to be filled with pine-knots and hung between the trees. I have often seen the plaza as light as day when they were all burning at once," replied his father, enjoying the looks of absolute delight on the faces of his "Gipsies."

"It sounds like the 'Arabian Nights,'" blissfully cried Lona, waving her hand.

"What did he say?" asked Loo, uneasily, for he knew Mr. Santa Claus takes queer notions sometimes.

"He replied that he remembered how splendid it used to look out there and he would help all he could to make it extra beautiful, in honor of sister Althea," replied Mrs. Alvoyd.

"Mama, may we have our Avalon friends?" asked Loll, stamping about in *La Varsovienne* style.

"Why, of course, and we'd add a few teeny

little girls for Althea," answered her mother, catching the baby up, for the golden head was nodding away like a drowsy little buttercup.

"And — Santa Taus — is toming — s-o-o-n," was all they heard before the busy sandman finished his sleepy work for that night.

From that evening until Thanksgiving, the "T" secret and the strawride vied with each other for mastery; the week before the twenty-fifth of November, the "ride" made great strides, for Lona was about again as lively as ever — Doctor Alvoyd declared that "it would take a triple-compound fracture of every limb to keep her still long;" but the fact seemed to please him more than anybody else, except perhaps Miss Alvoyd herself.

At seven o'clock Thanksgiving night, the barouche drove around to carry the twins and Max down to Court Brilliant, as Ethel's home on the outskirts of Avalon was called. The children each held a jolly, Golly-me-Gump-faced pumpkin; the boys had long horns also, while the girls carried their own baby rattles, that Mammy Clar had produced from her treasure-box in the garret.

By the time they reached the "Court" the moon had crept up over the river, and they found all the young people waiting for them on the lawn. After they were all seated in the low wagon, lovely Mrs. Ray joined them and before anybody had time to express surprise Mr. Ray cracked his whip, and

they were off — looking like a wagon-load of fiery-eyed, restless imps. Such noise, and laughter, and fun the old turnpike had not heard in years!

Just when the children were beginning to get a bit tired of the "little tailor" position they had all taken on the straw, Bert Swain cried out, as he pointed down the road ahead of them, "Oh my, look! There's a fire. See the flames through that grove."

"It must be a shed, for there are no houses along this road," said Julia Aldrich.

"Here's where we stop for refreshments, ladies and gentlemen!" laughed Mrs. Ray as the horses turned a bend and drew up before an immense bonfire (Julia's shed).

The children scrambled out and ran into the light — but a cry from Leslie Myerson brought them all to the "lee side" of the fire, and there, spread out in the glow, was a white cloth, adorned with a simple array of sandwiches, cake, fruit, candy, and cups and saucers.

"I'm not going to do a bit of work!" declared Mrs. Ray as she seated herself under a tree and began to open a basket of spoons; "but if anybody wants chocolate they will find the raw material over there on that box, and really, I should like a cup of something warm, very much."

"Well, if you are not going to do anything, I'm not either," and Mr. Ray threw himself down be-

side his apparently lazy wife,—but they had made up between them to let the children have a full frolic, without orders, or waiting upon.

"All right, you be King and Queen, and we'll be the busy bees," shouted Stanley on his way to the fire with a pan of milk.

"I think I'll have to be a drone," said Lona woefully, for she found one hand of little use in the cooking frolic.

"Don't go away," said Max kindly, as she turned to walk back to the fire, "stay and talk to me while I work for both of us," for he was grating chocolate for dear life.

"Something's burning!" called Mrs. Ray, as a strong odor of scorching milk soon filled the air.

"It's the cocoa boiling over," calmly answered Clarence Dawson.

"If it's boiling over it's a sure sign it's done. I imagine I'd take it off the fire," advised Mrs. Ray, with a laugh.

Lee and Jack finally ordered the party to be seated, and went from guest to guest serving out the steaming beverage, with a great impartiality as to amount; but with equally great danger of scalding each lover of chocolate in turn.

After the feast, they all moved around to the other side of the fire, to rest and talk, gipsy fashion.

"Let's tell riddles," proposed Agnes Archer.

"All right, I've got a grand one," cried Bert

Swain, who had recently returned from a long visit to an aunt in New York City.

"Cousin Elsie gave me this one," he said chuckling to himself.

"We're ready," said Loo.

"Well, what did Lot's wife turn to?" he asked, with a grin.

"Salt!" cried everybody in chorus.

"No."

"She did too," protested Agnes Archer.

"Well I know — but that's not the answer to the riddle," assented Bert.

"We give up."

"To rubber!" shouted Bert, choking with laughter.

Some of the Florida children had never heard the New York slang expression meaning "to look;" but it was some time before any one who did understand it, stopped laughing long enough to explain.

"Let's tell stories," said Rose White, after the long, hearty laugh had died away.

"Suppose we find out what flower and precious stone each of us have for our birth month," suggested Mrs. Ray. "When I was a little girl, Mama used to give each of us a Patron Saint, for the month; and read us short stories of their lives and make us memorize the name and special virtue of our saints, and it remained with us to imitate that virtue, and at the end of the month see how far we

had advanced in it. It was a beautiful practice, but as many of you are not Catholics you ought to know the traditions of the flower and stone of your birth, and try to make them true, for they all mean something noble and good."

"Oh, please tell us ours, Mrs. Ray; I never heard of them," said Clara Myerson.

"Well, I'll begin with LeRoy and Leona Alvoyd — why, all four of you were born on Christmas, were you not?" she exclaimed with a laugh.

"Yes'm; we're all Christmas presents," replied the young Lord of Rosemont.

"Then you all have the turquoise, that delicate pale blue stone, for your jewel — and it stands for prosperity; while the December flower, the holly, is the emblem of home happiness."

"How lovely!" whispered Loll, running her hand gently through Loo's dark curls, as he lay with his head in her lap.

"Alice, when is your birthday?" asked Mrs. Ray.

"First of April! Papa always says I was an April-fool's joke — that I never was born — but that the window was open and I 'blewed in.'"

Every one laughed, for they all knew that jolly Mr. Archer simply gloried in his sturdy, fair-haired daughters, and had often been heard to say that "if God spared him his girls he would not ask for a son."

"April — let — me — see, oh yes, diamonds and daisies, and both mean innocence."

"Mrs. Ray, does that kind of innocence mean being 'green?'" asked Agnes with a comical grimace at her sister.

"I won't tell," laughed their hostess.

"Max, when did you come?" she questioned, kindly; for, though almost a stranger, Max was already quite a favorite.

"Twelfth of July," answered the boy, bashfully.

"Then the ruby of nobility and the snowdrop of devoted love belongs to you."

"That's true," whispered Lona, under cover of an immense cookie.

Max thanked her for the compliment by coolly taking a bite of her cake, which seemed to please her greatly, for she only pretended to slap him for his liberty with her goody.

"Rose, what is your month?" asked Mrs. Ray, addressing a rosy-faced little girl of twelve.

"March. I was born on my mother's birthday, the nineteenth."

"The blood-stone is for March, and means courage—the flower is violet, love and fidelity. Courage and love certainly were given to you and your Mama, dear." For the struggle of Rose and her mother to keep home bright and cheerful for the children, when their dear father was sailing over strange seas, under the beloved Red, White and Blue, was well known to the Avalon families whose parents were safe ashore.

"I know mine is a cobblestone and the weed a dandelion," sang Clarence Dawson, jumping up and proposing "blind man's buff." In an instant, the lazy gipsy postures gave place to a lively American frolic.

On the long drive home, "My Country 'tis of Thee," "Maryland, My Maryland," and "Suwanee River," sung by twenty sweet, young voices, filled the stilly night, as though the cumbersome wagon carried a precious load of tuneful spirits.

For fully a week the "dear friends" talked of nothing but the good time of Thanksgiving night. So the hay-ride wore the laurels for a while; but gradually the merry secrets and mysteries of the Christmas season gained sway, until the twenty-fifth of November became a jolly memory, and the twenty-fifth of December a delightful expectation.

At the last minute Dr. Alvoyd received word from Santa Claus that he could not possibly spare enough presents to decorate such an immense tree as he had just heard had been put up on the south plaza of Rosemont, as straight from Florida he drove to Greenland, and needed a great many gifts for his little people in the snow-banks.

So the boys took several trips to the swamp, for seasoned woods; and the girls worked for hours among yards upon yards of rainbow ribbons to be made into dainty pincushions and sachets that

Mama was to paint with the birth-flower of each little lady-guest.

Mrs. Melody was a perfect artist in French tissue-paper fancies, and sent a basket full of dainty doll hats, from Pokes to Gainsboroughs, in the most delicate shades, with trimmings of ribbons, feathers and flowers.

Each gentleman was to receive from her pretty work a scarlet cloth penwiper, adorned with a tiny papier-maché sailor in the costume of various stations in the American Navy, from jolly faced "middies" to dignified admirals.

Every one of Althea's little guests were to receive a whole family of clothes-pin children, with hemp curls, painted faces and sweeping robes of accordion-pleated paper.

When most of the work was done the "Birthday Journey" was taken in all its glory, though a bit earlier than usual and with two extra in the party; but somehow this only seemed to make it all the merrier, for the "two" were sister Althea and dear friend Max.

The stores never were so gay, nor the children in such a generous frame of mind, for somebody was forever wanting somebody else to leave them out of a purchase and add that amount to a gift for someone else.

The day before Christmas the house was in that delightful state of topsy-turviness that only comes

at Christmas time and fills even the most particular housewife's heart with joy.

That Christmas was the happiest the twins had ever known, for the fair Angel of Peace and Comfort and Joy seemed to have spread its shining wings over the old Rosemont Mansion, and made every heart sheltered there unite in a silent chorus,

"PEACE ON EARTH TO MEN OF GOOD WILL."

At seven o'clock, as the family and their two guests rose from tea, Mrs. Alvoyd said, "I want Max and all my babies, except Althea, to trot up to the nursery, close the door, and not come down until I call."

"I don't think it's fair to tell Althea Blossom all the secrets, and leave us out," cried Max, shaking his head at the child with a merry pout.

"Yes, and make us all go up to the nursery like babies," added Lee, but with a note of real wonder in his voice, for they had rather imagined that all secrets in which they were concerned had been told hours ago.

"I'll tell you in a little while, Maxie," answered Althea, putting her arms around Mrs. Alvoyd's neck and whispering something with a soft laugh.

In less than fifteen minutes the "exiles" heard someone call softly, "Lona, dear, we're ready!"

When they came running into the parlor, where they heard their father speaking, they saw him standing against the piano, with a serious look on his kind face, and Mrs. Alvoyd was beside him, with her hand slipped into his; while Althea was standing like a little angel at the foot of the two steps that lead up into the bay-window. She held tightly in both hands a long pink satin ribbon, which was fastened to a garland of roses, encircling a heavy drapery of silver moss, that completely hid the window-alcove.

As the children reached the center of the room, at a sign from their mother the twins hurried to her and left Max standing alone.

"Althea," said Dr. Alvoyd, and the little girl, in obedience to his signal, stepped forward, and with one gentle pull the soft curtains parted, and there unsupported stood — Max's mother.

For an instant a terrible silence filled the room, then Mrs. Melody, holding out her arms to her son, walked slowly down to him. Max gave a low, broken cry of —

"Maudechen!" and falling on his knees hid his face in the soft folds of her gown; while, with a frightened gasp, Althea flew to Dr. Alvoyd's arms, and had to be carried to the library, where it took the combined efforts of the entire family to soothe her, for the spectacle of "Aunty" walking towards her had terribly upset the still frail child; for even

the little streamer bearer had not been told the secret.

But even the twins were beside themselves with astonishment and joy; and had to be told over and over again how Mrs. Melody had accidentally discovered her new strength just a few weeks before; and how she did not tell Max at first, fearing the shock would make him anxious and fearful, and perhaps lessen her confidence in herself; but when she was sure, and wanted to tell him, Mama (to whom the happy little mother had confided her secret) begged her to let them all share in his happiness by having a beautiful setting for the surprise.

"Wasn't it lovely though! I'll never forget it! She looked like an angel, standing there among the flowers in her white dress!"

"Yes, an angel coming for Max, for he surely looked as if he was going to die when he saw her," commented the twins in a breath, as their mother finished the story.

After a brief happy time together, Mrs. Melody, leaning slightly on Max's arm, walked unsteadily into the library, where the "friends" were awaiting them, with moist eyes and tremulous smiles.

Max waited until his mother was safe in Mrs. Alvoyd's easy-chair, then turning, threw his arms about "his doctor" sobbing out his joy and thankfulness like a child.

There never was such a tearfully happy time in the length and breadth of this whole wide world as passed in that hour before the old-fashioned Southern Christmas-tree party of the children of Rosemont plantation.

THE END.

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